

Organizational Stability Facilitates Succession—and Attracts Candidates

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What makes a children's museum attractive to potential new leaders? Children's museums offer a challenging mix of growth opportunities, diverse audiences, major new programs, and the potential for high impact. But for anyone considering leading one, the above description is just the tip of the iceberg. Savvy candidates will not overlook what lies below—a strong organizational foundation.

This article reviews the four key building blocks of organizational stability. A solid organizational foundation eases leadership transitions and allows museums to recruit top candidates quickly.

1 Create great mission, vision, and values statements

Have you ever read a **mission statement** and wondered what industry the organization was in? Short, crisp mission statements are worth the effort it takes to create them, because they clearly communicate to everyone, inside and outside, what the organization does. Mission statements generally begin with the word “to” and are limited to two or three lines.

Involving both staff and board in developing a mission statement ensures everyone has a stake in the result. Board members have overview; staff has in-the-trenches experience. The combination is powerful.

Sciencenter is a hybrid children's museum and science center. Refined periodically over the years, our mission statement now reads: “To inspire excitement for science through interactive exhibits and programs that engage, educate, and empower.” It's

short and memorable enough to guide us regularly.

A key use of the mission statement is to filter ideas and opportunities an organization might pursue. Mission-filtered exhibits, programs, and events form a cohesive organizational program that is easy to promote, both for attendance and as a well-defined case for fundraising support. Conversely, when turning down an offer, it's helpful to be able to say, “This is a great idea, but unfortunately it falls outside our mission.”

In contrast, a **vision statement** is the state of the world that your organization aspires to help bring about. An effective vision statement is very short and describes a condition, not an activity. Thus, a vision never begins with the word “to.” Further, an organization can't achieve its vision alone. It works with others to contribute to a better world. While it's unlikely you will ever fully achieve your vision, it serves to energize staff and board members. Our vision statement is: “Every young person is empowered to use science in shaping a better future.” We refer to it constantly in our day-to-day work.

Together, clear mission and vision statements form an incredibly effective tool for making decisions. If a project doesn't fit your mission and support your vision, don't do it.

A **values statement** encapsulates the norms and ethics that guide the behavior of individuals in an organization. They define the culture: is it inclusive? Innovative? Community-oriented? Is excellence a goal? A well-thought-out values statement lets ev-

eryone know *how* the organization will do its work and what is considered important.

As with mission and vision statements, it is best to let board and staff contribute to the process of defining an organization's values. Once the mission, vision, and values statements are adopted, they can be used in all aspects of your work. Some museums put their mission at the top of board meeting agendas. Others use their vision statement in external messaging. One thing is clear: keeping these foundational statements top-of-mind pays huge dividends in building organizational focus and stability.

2 Focus on staff orientation

“Well begun is half done.” This old adage is particularly apt when it comes to orienting new staff. The most teachable moment for an employee is their first day. Use it wisely! Minimize routine tasks like handing out keys and security codes. Instead, let senior staff use this window of opportunity to teach about the organization's mission, vision, values, strategic plan, culture, decision-making process, and educational goals.

Regardless of where a new person will work—from the front desk to the education department to the development office to the exhibits shop—imparting an understanding of the key organizational elements on the first day will make a statement about how their work will contribute toward the organization's impact and vision. Getting staff off to a great start though a carefully planned orientation period leads to staff

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THE IDEAL BOSS

Ten tips that will help anyone, regardless of their position on the organizational chart, to get the best long-term effort from any staff or volunteers they



manage. I tape this to the side of my monitor, where it serves as a constant reminder.

1. Leads with a clear vision. Inspires others by sharing a clear picture of what they are trying to accomplish and why.
2. Help others succeed. Provides the support, tools, resources, and guidance to help others succeed. Motivates the team by caring about the success of all.
3. Values different skills and talents. Understands unique contributions of different people and knows how to best utilize individual talents.
4. Invites participation by all. Asks for input and honestly considers it before making decisions.
5. Communicates effectively. Keeps everyone informed about all they need to know, both for practical reasons and so that all feel “in the loop” and part of the team.
6. Respects and trusts staff. Delegates and trusts others to do a good job, but also checks in and shows interest regularly.
7. Recognizes good performance. Recognizes dedication and achievement and is an effective cheerleader who thanks others for a job well done.
8. Leads with integrity. Is always honest and fair. Others need to know that their boss will never lie to them.
9. Listens! Practices reflective listening and articulates back what they have heard to ensure the content and the tone of the message have been correctly understood.
10. Has their heart really in it. They are passionate about their work and radiate their enthusiasm to everyone else.

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who understand why their work is important and pays off for years through lower turnover and higher job satisfaction.

A sample orientation program that follows this protocol is available at MuseumTools.org.

3 Develop a culture of commitment

How does a leader build staff commitment over the long haul? One of the best ways is to have a clearly articulated set of objectives for how you aspire to lead (*see sidebar on page 9 for one example*).

Another way is to ask staff for regular feedback about their work experience through periodic “climate surveys.” Simple surveys that take no more than five minutes are best, since high participation and comparison between surveys are important. Our museum's survey, which has ten multiple-choice questions and one short-answer question, is administered using SurveyMonkey. Surveys should be 100 percent anonymous and leaders should never attempt to match a set of responses with a person, because this will destroy trust in the survey's anonymity.

Following each quarterly survey, directors meet to discuss trends and suggestions, and identify one or more items to address over the coming quarter to improve the working climate.

4 Make succession planning a priority

Succession planning is a scary thought for many people and organizations, but it is simply part of good management. If you're a leader, you might think that writing a succession plan is like announcing your resignation. It's not. On the other hand, if you're a board member concerned about “what would happen if...,” you might feel you are sending a subtle message of disapproval to the director. In reality, every organization, regardless of age or size, should have a succession plan. You can find an example of a succession plan at MuseumTools.org.

Here's why. The director, board members, staff, donors, members, and the community will feel more confident knowing how a variety of situations will be handled. What if the director develops an extended illness? What about sudden incapacity or death? How about two weeks' notice before a new job? Or even one year's notice? Will a

senior staff member take over temporarily? Will a board member be appointed interim director or will an interim director be hired from outside? Should a search firm be hired and how much should be budgeted?

Thinking about these questions and creating a written plan, especially when there is no urgency, indicates a stable organization—one that would be attractive for an incoming director. When leadership turnover does occur, organizations with these four elements in place have a distinct advantage, because they are more desirable and can recruit more qualified candidates, more quickly.

Good management and a stable work environment usually lead to less turnover, more productive staff, deeper commitment by board members, stronger donor support, and ultimately, a better experience for the museum's audience. It's good for the museum—and very appealing to new talent when positions open up.

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