

Breaking Down Barriers: Adopting a Holistic Approach to Safety, Collections Management, and the Visitor Experience

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A Time of Reflection

When the museum I was working for closed its doors to the visiting public during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the initial shock began to wear off, a common thread began to weave its way into many of the conversations I was having. How would we use this time?

Previously, the museum hadn't been closed for more than a day or two consecutively since the completion of a large renovation project a decade earlier. Like many events of that year, this closure was "unprecedented" and it felt important that, amidst all the chaos around us, we take the time to reflect on things that we wanted to look different when our doors reopened.

The issues that arose in these initial conversations will sound familiar to most museum professionals. On the one hand there were plenty of quantifiable, immediate problems looming. Collections storage space was maxed out, positions and programs were underfunded, facilities needed renovation and repair. On the perhaps more intangible front, we struggled to successfully gauge visitor engagement and our progress toward improving overall accessibility and inclusivity both for our visitors and within our internal culture.

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As the expected two-week closure dragged on for months, each department championed their own concerns, vying for some mythical pot of money that our leadership would produce to solve the problem deemed most worthy. It struck me, not for the first time, how backwards this internal competition seemed. Weren't we all there to meet the same goals and serve the same needs?

This phenomenon is, of course, not unique to museums. Many mission-driven organizations struggle to find a way to unify behind a shared mission when competition for limited resources so often fosters disunity. This begs the question, is there a better way?

Core Principles

I believe there is and in my mind, there are two core principles that govern the way forward - access and safety. Regardless of their individual missions, all museums are charged with the often seemingly competing tasks of safeguarding their collections and providing access to them in a way that is safe and welcoming for the visiting public. The only way to achieve both to their fullest possible extent is to view them as holistic, even symbiotic, components of a unified approach.

This becomes challenging when the functions of these two principles are divided across several departments that are competing for resources. For example, many museums entrust sole responsibility for the safety of collection objects to curators and collections staff, while visitor and staff safety may be the work of the security team and visitor services. However, collections will not be safe from unnecessary harm without a strong approach to both security and visitor experience where rules and expectations are communicated clearly and reinforced consistently and equitably. Similarly, the visitor experience would suffer without both an effective collections management strategy that ensures objects are exhibited in a way that makes them accessible as well as a visitor experience strategy that ensures visitors feel safe and welcome while at the museum.

Communication is Key

To ensure that these functions all work together requires a high level of communication and coordination as well as a willingness to work outside of traditional museum operational norms.

This is not a revolutionary idea but it is one that museums have long struggled to achieve. An encouraging indicator that change may be on the horizon has been the increased number of organizations that are combining their visitor experience and security teams under leaders with strong backgrounds in both fields. Embedding the

idea that the one informs the other into a leader's job title sets a certain expectation for collaboration from the top down.

Additional approaches to improve information sharing and communication across collections teams and frontline teams, such as security and visitor services, could include periodically hosting joint all hands meetings to evaluate elements of collection care, museum safety/security, and the overall visitor experience. For example, a meeting to jointly discuss collection care could include sharing condition reports compiled by the collections team, incident reports involving collection items or exhibit areas from the security team, and an observational study on the effectiveness of signage and stanchions in exhibits by the visitor services team. The combined information creates a more complete picture of existing challenges and potential solutions than any one team's piece of the puzzle on its own. Furthermore, working cross-departmentally on a daily basis, rather than just when problems come up, helps break down internal silos and hierarchies that prevent organizations from conducting higher level strategic thinking and planning.

Case Study

A particular example from my time in visitor services when this approach made collections safer and more accessible happened shortly after the museum reopened for the first time post-pandemic quarantine. A display of objects that had been planned before the closure was set to be installed and would include placing a very popular pop culture item in a small gallery with a single, controlled point of access. Pre-pandemic this was viewed as a great plan to increase foot traffic to the gallery and make a unique interpretive connection. However, the visitor services and security teams had been gathering data about visitor behavior after reopening. They shared their concerns that, given the museum's new social distancing guidelines, increased foot traffic to the small gallery would create long queues that posed a safety risk both to visitors and staff as well as to other nearby displays that may become perches for people tired of waiting in line.

Thanks to this data, the collections team was able to pivot to a new location for the display which allowed for better circulation. Sharing information proactively with each other allowed all three teams to arrive at a solution that balanced staff and visitor needs. Presenting that solution to leadership together eliminated competition over resources and ultimately saved the museum from paying for the additional signage and/or security staff that would have been needed to maintain safe occupancy levels in the smaller gallery.

A Collaborative Approach

Ultimately, exhibit and collection access and safety is at the heart of everyone's work at a museum. A collaborative approach to this shared mission and a willingness to pause and consider new ideas make them achievable goals. I think it is important to

add here that these shared goals are not exclusive to museum staff. It is dangerous to speak in absolutes so I will limit my statement to saying that the vast majority of visitors to a museum are not there with the intent to cause harm to the exhibits and collections. Many of them—many more than we tend to realize—do not visit museums regularly and may not have a firm grasp on museum etiquette. Treating visitors as adversaries that must be constantly thwarted from causing too much damage rather than as partners in collection care will have the expected result. Staff who are well-trained in how to give proactive information set the tone. Think of the difference in these two approaches:

Welcome to our museum! You will see these icons throughout the exhibits letting you know what you can touch. If you don't see this icon, please enjoy the display from a safe distance. That helps us protect our collections for future visitors.

Step back! You're too close. You're going to break something.

Which Would Set You Up for Success and Make You Want to Come Back If You Were a First-Time Visitor?

This informative and inviting tone can be taken throughout the museum in everything from signage to exhibit space design. Don't want visitors sitting on exhibit platforms? Include ample seating in exhibit spaces. Need visitors to stop taking selfies on your antique furniture? Put a replica in an easily accessible space and place clear boundaries around the actual object. This tried and true exhibit design feature is often thought of more as an accessibility or education tool than a safety measure. However, like most good tools and tactics, it can serve all three purposes. For example, the Deep Time exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History has several full-size replicas of fossils in front of the areas where the actual collection objects are displayed behind plexiglass barriers. This allows visitors to safely have the tactile experience that we know is an important part of deep, object-based learning and removes at least some of the temptation to reach over and pet a dinosaur's leg.

Additional ways to invite visitors to participate in collections care efforts start with stronger education efforts. If your museum provides any sort of introductory information to visitors such as an orientation video or pre-visit materials for school groups, include some basic collection care information. Use visuals that show the consequences of different materials being touched over time or of sitting/climbing on vulnerable objects. Provide regular collections care training and experiences to your docents and tour guides so that they can incorporate it in their tours and conversations with visitors.

Of course, even with all of these tactics deployed perfectly, there will still be incidents. People make mistakes, misjudge situations, and, above all, ignore signage. So a critical part of any museum's approach to exhibit access and safety is a robust incident response plan that is developed collaboratively by all museum staff responsible for carrying it out (a great topic for those joint meetings I mentioned earlier). Accept that incidents will occur and make sure all of your staff are prepared to respond to them in a way that prioritizes collection care, museum safety/security, and the visitor experience equally.

Ultimately, there is no quickstart guide to improving exhibit access and safety. It takes a willingness to change, to compromise, and to collaborate that is easier said than realized. At the end of the day, I do believe these are the actions/activities/attitudes that make a difference. We have been given the opportunity, however horribly it came about as the result of a global pandemic, to reimagine ourselves. How we meet that opportunity can have a deep impact on our organizations and our audiences.

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