

# Managing Change in Museums and Galleries

A Practical Guide

**PIOTR BIENKOWSKI AND  
HILARY MCGOWAN**



“Effective change management is one of the most essential skills for any leader – this book is a great reader for those new to leadership and those who need an insightful refresher. It’s accessible with real and relevant examples and based clearly on the broad experience of the authors and the individuals and organisations they’ve worked with. It’s the sort of book you’ll pick up for one purpose and then find that you’re drawn into – wanting (and needing) to read more and more.”

—**Iain Watson**, *Director, Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums*

“*Managing Change in Museums and Galleries* inspires, educates and empowers the reader to approach change in their museum with confidence. It is the book that I wish I’d had to support me over the last 25 years of my museum career. It applies concepts and theory to real life challenges, drawing on strong case studies from in and outside the museum sector. It is an invaluable guide to navigating change, and the challenges and opportunities it brings, in museums today.”

—**Emma Chaplin**, *Director, Association of Independent Museums*



# MANAGING CHANGE IN MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

*Managing Change in Museums and Galleries* is the first practical book to provide guidance on how to deal with organisational change in museums, galleries or heritage organisations.

Written by two authors who have direct experience of leading change, running change programmes and advising on change in more than 250 museums and galleries, the book identifies the various problems, issues and challenges that any professional in a museum or heritage organisation is likely to encounter and provides advice on how to deal with them. The book's six parts treat change holistically, and help the reader understand what change entails, prepare for it and lead it, ensure that everyone in the museum is involved, understand what can go wrong and evaluate and learn from it. Each chapter is devoted to a specific challenge that is often encountered during change and is extensively cross-referenced to other relevant chapters. Including a list of helpful resources and suggestions of useful publications for further reading, this book is a unique guide to change in museums.

*Managing Change in Museums and Galleries* is an essential resource for all museum practitioners – whether they be the people in museums and galleries who are leading change, or those affected by change as a leader, a member of staff or a volunteer.

**Piotr Bienkowski** has over 35 years of experience in the museum, arts, heritage and culture sector. As Director of the *Our Museum* programme, he oversaw one of the most extensive programmes of organisational change in the sector in recent times, working with nine museums across the UK to embed community engagement in their organisations. He has also been Deputy and Acting Director of Manchester Museum, and Professor of Archaeology and Museology at the University of Manchester, and he now advises a wide range of museums, galleries and heritage organisations as a consultant.

**Hilary McGowan** works with museums, galleries and heritage organisations to help them change, so they can thrive in the future. Her distinguished track record includes successfully leading major museums through change in York, Exeter and Bristol, increasing visitor numbers and boosting income. Hilary established her own business 25 years ago and has worked with over 200 different museums throughout the UK. As the principal museum Trustee at Bletchley Park for ten years, she played a leading role in the transformation of the Museum from mere survival to curatorial and commercial prosperity.

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*Piotr Bienkowski and Hilary McGowan*

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# FOREWORD

In June 2020, the nonprofit organisation OF/BY/FOR ALL ran a poll on one very simple question:

If a trusted funder offered your organisation a blank cheque right now for one of the following paths forward, what would you do with the money?

- A Use it to pay our team and come back to normal operation (with healthy reserves!) when it is safe to do so.
- B Use it as risk capital to pay our team to radically reinvent our programmes, services and business model.
- C Redirect the money to other organisations and people who are in greatest crisis right now.
- D Let the existing organisation die and use the money to build something totally new.

Across 1,000 respondents from cultural institutions around the world, 57 per cent opted for B – to take the risk and reinvent everything. If you're picking up this book, my guess is you are among this 57 per cent. You see the potential for change at your organisation. You see the potential to become more relevant and valued in your community. You see glaring issues to fix, systems to break and rebuild and new goals to pursue.

That's wonderful. That's the way I see museums, too.

But I invite you – for a moment – to consider your colleagues who did not pick option B. The people who, despite the enormity of what the world demands of us, do not feel called to change. The preservationists who would prefer to hunker down and wait for the clouds to part. The professionals who see change as inappropriate or poor form. The cynics who have been burned in previous attempts to make change. The meek who are hesitant to try.



There are many such people in our organisations. When I started out as a young changemaking museum director, I naively saw these people as enemies. I assumed they were fundamentally disagreeable, prejudiced or opposed to change. I drew battle lines between 'us', who wanted to build an inclusive future, and 'them', who wanted to protect an elitist relic.

I quickly learned how short-sighted I was and how poorly this perspective would serve me. I learned most people don't fear change. They fear loss. They fear grief. They fear having their hearts broken because something close to them has moved far away. And because of this fear, they are not equipped for change. They don't see the future in it – or often, they don't imagine a role for themselves in that future.

To lead change, I learned to invite people into that possible future. I learned to make my intentions clear and inviting. I learned to ask people to consider that loss might come with gain. I learned to stop thinking about 'us' and 'them' and instead to think about how I could invite people who were invested in the past to write themselves into a different future. Instead of casting people out, I asked them to choose to pitch in.

To me, choice is the crux of institutional change. It's not about whether you need to change or want to change. It's not about whether you fear it or hunger for it. It's about whether you choose to change.

Change is hard. But choosing to change – that should feel easy. Change is a choice you make every day when you get up in the morning. It's a choice you can hold yourself and others accountable to. The choice is a gift that propels you through the hard stuff, the change you want and the change you don't.

This, to me, is why this book is not called 'making' change but 'managing' change. When you manage change, you don't just plough through and do what you like. You don't give up when it doesn't work out. You choose to launch a change process. You invite others in. You explain why it matters. You paint a picture of a beguiling destination, and you encourage people to sketch themselves into that future. You listen calmly as people shake their fists and shout that your change is going to ruin everything. You accept praise and redirect it to your team, or use it to build momentum for a hard choice ahead. You show up with energy and hope each day, and you watch as the change spreads, from your own heart to the hearts of your colleagues, community partners and stakeholders.

Of course, it all sounds lovely in the abstract. But it's damn hard work. I know what it's like first hand. In 2011, at the age of 29, I became the director of a small museum in California that was on the brink of closure. I didn't know much about the organisation, but they had a vision statement to become a 'thriving central gathering place'. I knew this vision was only possible if we changed deeply – and fast.

My first week on the job, I asked staff to join me in taking a 20 per cent salary cut. I told my new colleagues I believed our organisation could and should have a bigger impact – and that we could do it if we worked in deep partnership with our diverse community. I asked them to work with me to try to build that museum. And while some of these people were no doubt sceptical, stressed, scared, or confused, they chose to get involved. They chose to work together to change.

My playbook for change mirrors much of what you'll read in this book. It was driven by an intense external stimulus – a lack of funds and relevance. We used that impetus to develop a strong vision. We brought in many new voices as staff, trustees, partners and volunteers. We experimented – imperfectly. We celebrated together when the vision became real in the form of new visitors, programmes, energy, funding and meaning.

We often got it wrong. Sometimes I got hurt, and sometimes I hurt others. Institutional change involves a breaking and remaking that can be confusing, upsetting and painful. I grew accustomed to the phenomenon of the 'good/bad' meeting, where it was good because it had gone badly. I took angry phone calls from disillusioned former supporters. I learned to treat detractors with compassion, even as I stayed focused on the path we'd chosen to change. And I tried to protect my team – and myself – when the vision got demeaned, distorted and thrown back in my face.

Over time, more and more of us chose to change. We chose, together, to build a more inclusive, relevant institution. We managed change like one might manage a garden, planting seeds, encouraging volunteers, clearing weeds, cleaning up after storms, watering, feeding, pruning and cultivating the work towards the vision.

Like a garden, the change I led was not permanent. Nor likely will yours be. The museum kept shifting during my eight years as director, and, after I left, it continued to shift further. Today, I watch my former museum keep changing from the sidelines. Sometimes I cheer. Sometimes I mourn. But every day I know the choice to change was worth it.

Nina Simon

**Nina Simon is Founder and CEO, OF/BY/FOR ALL, and author of *The Art of Relevance* and *The Participatory Museum*.**

# INTRODUCTION

## The challenge of change

Organisational change is one of the biggest challenges facing museums and galleries across the world today.<sup>1</sup> The need to change is usually a response to different external pressures. Often these are financial deficits, demands that museums and galleries alter their missions and business models to address funding priorities more directly or the ability of museums to be more responsive to the public and engage with diverse and marginalised audiences. Globally, financial pressures have built up in recent years. There has been a general trend to extract better value for money in public services, and this will certainly continue for the foreseeable future given the state of the global economy.

On occasion, of course, external change agents – not all man-made – have caused wider disruption, and have impacted a larger number of museums, such as terrorism; the AIDS, Ebola and SARS epidemics; or flooding and other weather disruptions, but these have usually been limited geographically or socially. It so happens that this book is being published in the wake of the most devastating and wide-ranging of these, the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. This was a disaster for museums and galleries across the whole world, most of which had to close for many months, losing income and shedding staff. The impact will be felt for many years, and the need for change to respond to this sudden and unexpected crisis is affecting every single organisation, in terms of finance, staffing and finding a role to serve their communities.

Few were immune from the need for change even in normal times. Some of this change was imposed, for example when funders and stakeholders bailed a museum or gallery out of financial crisis, and some of it was voluntary, as when a governing body recognised the need for change and proactively responded to external pressure



from stakeholders or communities or a lack of funding. Organisational change often involves financial cuts and ‘efficiency savings’, and can include changes to aims and mission, staff restructures, role changes and redundancies and fundamental shifts in fundraising and commercial activities. Potentially, it can affect everyone working in a museum or gallery. In the wake of the pandemic, all of these factors are true for all museums and galleries across the world – response to a pandemic is little different from a response to any other major crisis, but it affects everyone at the same time and as a result the usual sources of external support are overstretched. The need for change is no longer an option – it is essential.

Yet, despite change having been a common fact of museum and gallery life for decades, in the authors’ experience much change fails to achieve its goals or seems to take so long that everyone involved loses focus (and patience). Staff faced with the introduction of a change programme often automatically equate it with restructuring and redundancies; as a result, fear for their jobs sets up a resistance which can undermine the whole change programme. Across all sectors, including culture, it is widely reported that at least 70 per cent of attempts at organisational change fail, and those that succeed do so only after about five years.<sup>2</sup> There are common factors behind the failure of change initiatives, and common strands in their success. The purpose of this book is to bring those out in a practical, accessible way that will allow your change programme to succeed, adapt and be sustainable. Having a workable plan for change is more important now than ever before.

The guidance and learning in this book are applicable to all types of museums around the world, and we have incorporated examples and case studies from a range of countries with different museum environments. The existing literature on long-term change in the museum sector is sparse. There are only three case studies worldwide in which long-term change, over many years, has been carried out, recorded, analysed and the transferable learning drawn out and published. Two of these are on individual museums – Robert Janes on Glenbow Museum in Canada, and Nina Simon on Santa Cruz Museum in California – while one is on a long-term programme of change across nine museums and galleries in the UK (the *Our Museum* programme, directed by one of the authors). Useful lessons on change are also found in the publications of the UK *Circuit* programme and, in the USA, the James Irvine Foundation’s New California Arts Fund evaluation. Outside the museum sector, the study of change at the Royal Shakespeare Company also has relevant and valuable lessons for museums and galleries.<sup>3</sup>

This book is based on the authors’ direct experiences of leading change, running change programmes, advising on change and being part of change in more than 250 museums and galleries, mostly in the UK but also in Europe. These range from the smallest volunteer-run museums to the largest multi-site organisations, cover all forms of governance (independent, local authority, university, regimental and national museums) and all types of collections (art, archaeology, ethnography, science, local history, rural and industrial museums).

## The structure of this book and how to use it

This book is about managing and dealing with change. It is explicitly aimed at practitioners – the people in museums and galleries who are leading change or are affected by change. It is about the practicalities of change: a guide to all the challenges you are likely to encounter during change and how to deal with them, whether as a leader, a staff member or a volunteer affected by change.

The book is divided into six parts. These are arranged logically from defining change, to preparing for it, leading it, dealing with it as a staff member or volunteer, understanding why change fails and evaluating and learning from it:

Part 1: What Is Change?

Part 2: Preparing for Change

Part 3: Leading Change

Part 4: The Role of Staff and Volunteers in Change

Part 5: Why Change Fails

Part 6: Evaluating and Learning from Change

The book comprises 56 chapters divided among these six parts. Each chapter is devoted to a specific topic that you might encounter on your change journey, for example, ‘What makes a good change leader?’, or ‘Countering resistance to change’. At the end there are lists of *Resources to Help You* (primarily a list of practically focused web-based resources on change in museums and galleries) and *Useful Publications* – these are, deliberately, not an exhaustive list of literature on change in museums (much of which is theoretical and/or aimed at academics), but strictly books and papers that practitioners might find useful when dealing with change on the ground.

Spoiler alert! This is not a ‘how-to’ guide or a toolkit, because organisational change is not linear and will be different in every museum or gallery. We do not wish to mislead readers that they can follow this book, step by step, as a toolkit for change. Instead, the book identifies all the various considerations, problems and challenges that any museum’s change process is likely to encounter and gives practical advice on how to deal with each one. Of course, these are often interlinked, and so each theme-based chapter is cross-referenced to other relevant chapters.

Earlier, we noted the scarcity of case studies on long-term change. The learning from these has been incorporated into this book and the case studies are cited where appropriate. There are also case studies from the authors’ own experiences of change management, but for reasons of confidentiality these have usually been anonymised. However, accounts of case studies have been kept to a minimum. The purpose of this book is to offer concise and practical guidance, not detailed case studies, which in any event can occasionally date quickly, or are perceived (rightly or wrongly) as not relevant to a particular museum or type of museum. For that reason, in most chapters our preferred approach has been to use quotations

from practitioners, which reveal their responses and insights regarding particular approaches to change. In other work, we have found that readers respond positively to these sorts of short quotations rather than lengthy and perhaps less immediately relevant case studies.

One of the basic principles of the authors' approach – borne out time and again in their work over many years – is that for change to be successful it must involve everyone and be everyone's responsibility, not just that of directors and boards. This is a thread that runs through the book. As a result, this book is aimed at all practitioners involved in change: directors, managers, governing bodies, staff members, volunteers and strategic partners. There are always actions that anyone can take – whatever their role – to help shape and deal with change. Everyone has the capacity, and the responsibility, to be a change agent.

We envisage that the typical practitioner-user, in search of practical and concise guidance, will start by consulting a particular chapter whose topic they are encountering in their museum/gallery, and will then find cross-references to other related chapters – thus using the book in the manner of a trouble-shooting guide, rather than something to be read systematically from cover to cover. Nevertheless, the sequencing of the six parts of the book also encourages practitioners (especially leaders) to think holistically about change – to understand what it entails, to prepare for it, involve everyone, implement it successfully, be aware of what can go wrong and evaluate and learn from the process.

For convenience and to avoid unnecessary duplication, throughout the book the word 'museum' should be understood to include both museums and art galleries. The guidance is also transferable to other cultural organisations. The authors have found that archives, heritage sites, libraries, and science and discovery centres have similar challenges to museums, and that the same approaches to managing change are also effective there.

## Notes

- 1 For the challenges facing museums and their need to change, see, for example, G. Black, *Transforming museums in the twenty-first century* (Routledge 2012), pp. 1–6 and *Museums and the challenge of change: Old institutions in a new world* (Routledge 2021).
- 2 R. Hewison, J. Holden and S. Jones, *All together: A creative approach to organisational change* (Demos 2010), p. 19.
- 3 Full references to these case studies are in Chapter 53 and the *Resources to Help You* and *Useful Publications* sections at the end of the book.