

2020 | 2

Museum – Politics –
Management

**Journal of Cultural Management
and Cultural Policy**

**Zeitschrift für Kulturmanagement
und Kulturpolitik**

[transcript]

**JOURNAL OF CULTURAL MANAGEMENT
AND CULTURAL POLICY**

**ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR KULTURMANAGEMENT
UND KULTURPOLITIK**

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**Volume 6 | Number 2
2020**

[transcript]

**Fachverband
Kulturmanagement**

Refooling for the Revolution: Framing the Future of Museum Management After COVID-19

Umrüstung für die Revolution: Die Zukunft der Museumsverwaltung gestalten nach COVID-19

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Abstracts

In March 2020, COVID-19 descended on American museums, exposing financial and operational fragility. It also exposed the limitations, harms and inequities of standard practices in museum management. The result was a widespread deaccessioning of staff, gutting departments that directly serve audiences and disproportionately impacting workers of color – a regressive step in a field moving toward decolonized and audience-centered practice. Despite the retrenchment, signs also indicate a revolution in progress. Key thinkers have argued that museums are making a long-term paradigm shift, from “being *about* something to being *for* somebody” (WEIL 1999). Responses to COVID-19 suggest that this shift has yet to penetrate the ‘deep structures’ of museum management. This article recognizes a museum “paradigm crisis” in which old and emerging systems coexist and conflict. Arguing that museums have neglected human-entered management strategies, it puts forward Bolman and Deal’s ‘Four Frames’ concept to build the managerial toolkit. Finally, it identifies priorities needed in an emerging paradigm: racial and cultural equity and diversity, compensation and wage equity, smarter work practices, and community care.

Im März 2020 brach COVID-19 auf US-amerikanische Museen herein und entlarvte deren finanzielle und administrative Fragilität und problematische Praktiken im Museumsmanagement: Die Entlassung von Mitarbeitern und Mitarbeiterinnen, Auflösung ganzer Abteilungen, resultierte in einer unverhältnismäßig starken Beeinträchtigung des Publikums und Schwarzer Angestellter – ein letztlich regressiver Schritt in einem Bereich, der sich in Richtung einer dekolonialisierten und publikumsorientierten Praxis bewegte. Dennoch gibt es Anzeichen dafür, dass Museen einen langfristigen Paradigmenwechsel vollziehen, von ‚über etwas zu sein‘ zu ‚für jemanden da zu sein‘ (WEIL 1999). Die Reaktionen auf COVID-19 deuten darauf hin, dass dieser Wandel noch nicht in die ‚Tiefenstrukturen‘ des Museumsmanagements eingedrungen ist. Dieser Artikel erkennt eine museale ‚Paradigmenkrise‘, in der alte und neue Systeme nebeneinander existieren und miteinander in Konflikt stehen. Er argumentiert, dass Museen ihre Managementstrategien vernachlässigt haben und schlägt das ‚Four Frames‘-Konzept von Bolman und Deal vor, um ein Management-Toolkit zu entwickeln. Schließlich werden die Prioritäten identifiziert, die für das neue Paradigma benötigt werden: ethnische und kulturelle Gleichheit und Vielfalt, Lohngerechtigkeit, intelligentere Arbeitspraktiken und Sorge für Gemeinschaft.

Keywords

cultural industry / Kulturwirtschaft, social change / Sozialer Wandel, management, museum, cultural organizations / Kulturbetrieb

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1. Introduction

When we talk of revolutions, we tend to speak of moments when they “began,” as if there is always a single instigating event. Public history practitioners, though, are trained to teach revolution as the result of long pent-up energy toward change, accumulating strength even as it is held back. By the time the first volleys are sent, a revolution has been underway for some time.

Museum revolutions are no different. The novel coronavirus did not mark the beginning of a revolution, but revealed that we were already in the midst of one. I found myself on its battle lines on the morning of March 12, 2020, as I drafted a preposterous set of proposals for adapting public tours to the conditions of a viral pandemic. Peers in other institutions were all struggling with the same dilemma: it wasn’t possible to operate safely, yet there was and still is heavy pressure on many American museums to maintain the flow of admissions revenue, as so many critically rely on income from tickets, café, retail, and associated services. For many museums, to close meant accepting disastrous operating budget shortfalls and accompanying painful reductions. Amid this dark calculus, a pop-up message appeared on my screen: The Metropolitan Museum of Art had just closed – indefinitely. Over the next hours, dozens, then hundreds, of institutions followed, capitulating to the undeniable threat of the disease. That day had the aura of a disaster movie – one after another, museum lights winked out across the cityscape, as the shadow moved over Manhattan.

I came in the next morning prepared to coordinate a furlough for the education department I led, only to learn that I, too, would be losing my job that day. Position eliminations, layoffs, and furloughs added up to a dramatic cut that, at the height of the crisis, reduced the active staff by nearly 90%. Our museum was one of the first in the field to cut jobs and hours, but even as I packed my things, I knew we would not be the last. American museums operated on too thin a margin, and were too dependent on admissions and earned revenue, to continue pre-pandemic levels of employment. It was clearly an inflection point, and it would be important to understand the impact to the field as a whole. The next week, I opened up a Google Doc and created a spreadsheet to track museum job losses and staff reductions due to COVID-19, as reported by

staff themselves and in the news.¹ Over the next twelve weeks, the tally on that spreadsheet grew to exceed 200 museums and the reduced or eliminated employment of more than 20,000 people. As drastic as that seemed, when we compared self-reported data to sampling from emergency funding applications, it was clear the actual losses were probably four to five times greater.

The damage was grievous. American museums are funded by mixed sources. A 2008 IMLS study reported that 70% of American museums were run by independent nonprofits, drawing on average less than 15% of their support from government (MANJARREZ et al. 2008: 26). Budgets are balanced by combining contributions from individual donors and corporations; grants from government agencies and private foundations; and earned revenue, including admission ticketing, retail stores and cafes, program fees, and special event rentals. COVID-19 threatened every one of these sources. On March 18, Laura Lott, director of the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), predicted that as many as one-third of American museums would close by the end of the crisis (POGREBIN 2020), a view supported later by a survey of 750 museums in which one-third of the directors said they thought their museums were at “significant risk” of not surviving (AMERICAN ALLIANCE OF MUSEUMS 2020). On April 13, AAM put forward three scenarios for financial survival. Under the *least* disastrous, 10% of museums would permanently close by the end of 2020, while another 20% would be operating hand-to-mouth, with no reserves (MERRITT 2020). Operating budgets had to be trimmed, and staff positions, typically 50% or more of operational costs, were on the chopping block.

2. A Curiously Uneven Impact

Spreadsheet watchers noted early on not all museum departments were taking the same hit. In the first eight weeks, job reductions disproportionately came to workers who directly serve visitors: education, visitor services, retail, and security. With no tickets to sell, exhibits to explain,

1 The idea of a crowdsourced spreadsheet to track and pool information was inspired by the informal group Art & Museum Transparency, who created a salary comparison spreadsheet in 2019 (GREENBERGER 2019). This revealed enormous pay differences and disparities among American museum workers. The COVID-19 Staff Impact is a live Google Sheets spreadsheet that can be accessed at <<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1acEaRssONaAlFjTheEFybfhBBIb3OIuOne-NHsgHOMxg/edit?usp=sharing>>.

galleries to guard, or school buses to greet, administrators seemed to have determined that visitor-facing staff were simply not needed. If the work was disappearing, then so must the workers.

As the numbers grew, so did the outcry of hurt, anger, and betrayal from museum workers. Though most could understand the complete cutoff of earned revenue, managerial responses were not equally well understood, detailed, or accepted. Managers moved to shed staff as the main immediate response and did not seem to engage in foresight into the post-lockdown environment. Critique fell into two categories, each providing clues about the deepest commitments of the museum field:

2.1 Things Over People

Administrative, curatorial, and collections-serving departments fared much better in COVID-19 cutbacks than education and other public-serving departments. In part, that's because there are simply more positions there to cut. Education and visitor services departments often (until recently) represented the largest numbers of positions. But cutting them more deeply than curatorial and collections departments also reflects a deep structural assumption about what a museum is.

Many administrators said in public statements that conditions were forcing them to retain only the "core" of the museum. Here, "core" seemed to mean collections, buildings and/or historic sites and the staff positions closest to them. These statements reinforced notions of museums as basically collection-holding entities. Metaphorically, museums became like hypothermia victims, with collections functions as the vital organs, and all others outer limbs that could be sacrificed.

Admittedly, it is simpler to drop staff on short notice than to deaccession collections, consolidate facilities or sell buildings – in part because conventional practice and accounting tradition demand lengthy, labor-intensive processes. But curatorial and collections *positions* have also been largely retained. Audience-centered work, it seemed, could be reconstituted when things get 'back to normal': dry the museum down to a powder of physical things, and bring it back to life later by pouring people on it.

If that model sounds off, it's because decades of practice and scholarship have, until now, considered it the way of the past. Why has the collection-dominant museum suddenly risen again, zombie-like? Preserving collections functions at the expense of outreach and engagement is at odds with the stories museums usually tell their constituencies about

the value of their services (KIEHL/MOON 2020). Cases for support are usually made on the basis of human impact: number of student visits, services to seniors, attendees to exhibitions and programs, impact on tourism spending or community development. Though collections and buildings largely define the subject matter focus, the great majority of objects, after all, are never seen by audiences, and during the pandemic, only a fraction of people will see even the small percentage on view. The elimination of staff who create access to that content raises important questions: how will museums serve audiences through the full length of the pandemic? How will they recover and refresh their offerings without staff who maintain community relationships, deeply understand program design, and know how to care for participants?

2.2 A Values Disconnect

At closure, staff members were sent home to reinvent their working routines and structures, using communications technology not always well supported, or even supplied, by their museums. They valiantly (and a little desperately) scrambled to create alternative experiences, catering to audiences newly fragmented by quarantine challenges. While working harder than ever, they were troubled by survivor's guilt and the fear of being the next to be laid off. These difficulties were not always addressed. Worse, many museums handled terminations, furloughs, planning, and communication in ways that workers found painfully dismissive. Workers exchanged stories about the sense that they were being seen as disposable. A few examples:

- A history museum department head learned that her organization had informed part-time staff of their layoff via postal mail letters, notifying supervisors only after the letters had been sent. Concerned that her staff would be hurt by the impersonal communication, the manager asked for permission to call each person on the day the letters were to arrive. She said her supervisors were “shocked” that she would want to do this.
- In a science museum, a part-time staff member learned that she had been laid off when she was suddenly unable to access her museum email account. She later learned that notice of her termination had been sent via the same account, already locked before she could have opened it. It particularly rankled that full-time staff received personal calls from vice presidents, while part-time

staff were terminated via email. Said the employee, “even though I was part time and unimportant, it was still a big part of my life ... so it just sucks to see people who have been friends and mentors kicked around like this.”

- Another employee learned of her own layoff in a group text. Since she had heard nothing officially, she called her supervisor, receiving no response for more than two days. In the meantime, a local newspaper reported that 100% of the museum’s staff had been laid off. Her termination letter arrived a few days later.
- A curatorial assistant at a large urban art museum learned that his four-year appointment would expire early due to COVID-19. The changed time limit allowed the museum to reduce staff while maintaining a claim that it has not let anyone go. The employee has seen the pandemic as “exacerbating already precarious employment.”
- A senior manager at a large history museum, while furloughed, has received only three emails in three months from the museum, each pushing back the reopening date. None of the emails included safety protocols or other status updates. Says the manager, “There is no communication about what is coming, not even caring to reach out to say, ‘we realize this is a very hard time’.”
- A children’s museum staffer is troubled that the guest services team, mostly young people of color, is returning from furlough without having been involved in planning new safety protocols. “The reopening is being done without consultation, and in addition to a bad visitor experience, we ask a vulnerable and financially unstable population to return. And asking people not to touch/engage with the exhibits makes the job significantly harder.”²

Museum workers at all levels have been startled and confused by these responses, expressing frustration that values they have been trained to enact – human-centered practice; equity; access; growth, learning, and

2 All stories are as reported by the individual. These are a few among dozens of experiences shared anonymously with the author in May and June 2020. Many similar collecting efforts have been launched, for example, the anonymous survey “Cultural institutions and COVID-19” (<<https://covidmuseumsanonymous.wordpress.com/>>). As always, anecdotal data must be considered judiciously, because managers are often prevented from giving their perspective by legal and PR structures. It is always hard to comprehend a full picture based on any one account. However, the cumulative evidence points to a crisis of management across the field.

discovery; hospitality; inclusion; and care – have felt absent in the management of the crisis.

3. Are We “For Somebody” Yet?

Why do so many museum workers believe that museums are, or should be, organized around those humane values? The likely answer: because museum theory has been energetically promoting this view. Over the past three decades, generations of museum workers have grown up immersed in the idea that museums are undergoing a “paradigm shift,” a fundamental change in their most basic purpose, toward more human-centered practice. These ideas have been advanced by prominent thinkers such as Steven Weil and Gail Anderson, among many others. Weil often advocated a change in emphasis from collecting and preserving to communicating, educating, and interpreting; he called it a shift “from being about something to being for somebody,” and described the relationship between museums and audience as “a revolution in progress ... from one of mastery to one of service” (WEIL 2002: 197). Anderson, introducing her 2004 anthology *Reinventing the Museum*, saw museums were moving from “collection-driven” to “audience-focused,” from “elitist” to “equitable,” from “hierarchical structure” to “shared decision-making.” The paradigm shift positioned “the visitor, education and public service as the central focus,” and put “collections – historically viewed as the center of museum activities – [in a] supporting role that advances the educational impact” (ANDERSON 2004: 2–4). Museum studies programs, such as the Bank Street Graduate School of Education in the United States and the University of Leicester Museum Studies program in the United Kingdom, emphasized and expanded these notions in teaching the ‘new museology.’ So why, after decades of general agreement on this trajectory, have museums under pressure ejected education and visitor services functions and reverted to an understanding of themselves as collection-holding entities?

3.1 How Revolutions Happen

For help in understanding why museum responses to COVID-19 are so at odds with this shift, we can look at theories of how revolutionary changes in thinking come about. In 1962, historian of science Thomas Kuhn published an influential work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which

challenged the notion that new understandings grow bit by bit, through the gradual accumulation of knowledge. Instead, he argued, “science enjoys periods of stable growth punctuated by revisionary revolutions” (BIRD 2018) that completely reorient understandings of reality. During the stable periods, most science consists of work within “paradigms,” or structures of knowledge and practice built on broad consensus. When a paradigm is at its peak of acceptance, workers pursue what Kuhn calls “normal” practice. Their work explores and affirms the paradigm, is “tradition-bound,” and resists dedicating resources to efforts that might demand new theory. Things change and evolve incrementally, but the overall system maintains its balance (BIRD 2018).

But when new ideas that don’t fit under the dominant paradigm show power to solve stubborn problems, a revolution in thought begins. The classic example in science is the move from Ptolemy’s model of the universe, which stipulated that all planets revolved around the Earth, to the Copernican model, in which they revolve around the sun. That revolution undermined former understandings and power structures within and beyond science, but helped to solve problems the old model could not address. Over centuries, the new paradigm proved itself to be more useful.

Underlying every paradigm are ‘deep structures,’ or complexes of ideas, habits, practices, and assumptions in which people have invested for decades, even centuries. These deep structures make paradigms highly stable, generating reliable systems that help organizations become more “internally consistent ... more and more thoroughly adapted to carry out their missions” (GERSICK 1991: 19). Deep structures act as a sort of immune system, preventing risky or weak ideas from usurping resources. At the same time, deep structures limit a system’s awareness and exploration of potential alternatives. Even when a system has accepted a need to change, deep structures can “prevent its being *able* to change” (GERSICK 1991: 18).

A given paradigm may accommodate many incremental and additive changes, like adding education programming to collections-based institutions, without disrupting its deep structures. But when new ideas threaten a paradigm’s foundations, a field enters a time of volatile change, termed a *paradigm crisis*. One organizational theorist compares it to “the difference between changing the game of basketball by moving the hoops higher, and changing it by taking the hoops away. The first kind of change leaves the game’s deep structures intact. The second dismantles it.” (GERSICK 1991: 18-19) In paradigm crisis, old ideas mix

messily with heterogenous new experiments before any one organizing idea has taken the lead (BIRD 2018).

Museum thinkers have used Kuhnian ideas to identify paradigm shifts in museums (ANDERSON/RODLEY/ROUNDS 2019). In their book *Active Collections*, Elizabeth Wood, Rainey Tisdale, and Trevor Jones explore the implications of earlier work by Jay Rounds, who described three historical paradigms in museum practice (1999). The first, dating to the 18th century, saw the museum's purpose as furthering understanding of the natural world by collecting material for elite study and academic discourse. In this knowledge-development paradigm, wealthy gentlemen, industrial leaders, scholars and scientists created museums for study, allowing the masses in to be "elevated" only as an afterthought (WOOD/TISDALE/JONES 2018: 4). By the late 19th century, as immigration and mass media increased social fragmentation, a threatened elite used museums to provide "a tangible symbol of the dominant culture," putting forward unifying notions about the United States, illustrating political ideals, and reinforcing U.S. mythology. Rounds called this paradigm the "Cultural-Transmission" model of museums, transforming individuals into citizens by "pouring the contents of the culture" into them. In this paradigm, "social order was ensured because all people, being so thoroughly socialized, saw and understood things in the same way" (ROUNDS 1999: 5).

By the late 20th century, Rounds perceived a new paradigm emerging; he called it the "Meaning-Making" museum. This new idea "recognized that humans are not passive receptacles waiting to be filled with culture, but active agents who are pursuing personal agendas" (ibid.: 6). As Wood, Tisdale, and Jones describe it, "the theories of social determinism are falling apart as people acquire, use and discard different cultures instead of being socialized into them" (WOOD/TISDALE/JONES 2018: 4). The multiplicity and changeability of identity is mirrored in an emerging museum paradigm that privileges the individual, recognizes and respects agency, resists simple storylines, incorporates multiple perspectives, and serves many agendas.

Though the thinking behind this shift had been underway for decades, the COVID-19 crisis revealed that in practice, it was incomplete. With one foot in the developing paradigm of the people-centered museum, and one still planted in the top-down paradigm of cultural transmission through collections, many museums were not yet equipped to bring human-centered management strategies to the institutional changes demanded by the pandemic. concerns that museums are reneging on their

social purpose at time of great need result from the gap between the vast numbers of museum workers who have been exploring human-centered paradigms – often those most involved with serving audiences and assisting meaning-making through interpretation, education, and hospitality – and those still committed, consciously or not, to the deep structural assumptions of the waning paradigm of cultural transmission. We live and work in a time of paradigm crisis.

3.2 There is No Normal

Since the advent of COVID-19, museum folk often talk about ‘getting back to normal,’ or transitioning to a ‘new normal.’ But under Kuhn’s definition of “normal,” there’s no going back. The normal pre-pandemic museum was one in which education, user agency, and community service were incremental additions that did not dislodge problematic deep structures of the reigning cultural transmission paradigm.

During the COVID-19 shutdown, the United States roiled with pain and anger in response to a string of violent murders of Black people – Ahmaud Arbury, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and others – by Whites, the most recent in the nation’s long and horrific trajectory of attacks and killings motivated by racial hatred. After the murder of George Floyd, a Black citizen, by a White police officer, uprisings for racial justice spread into streets across the nation, with global resonances. Many museums failed to respond effectively, hampered by their own cultures of White supremacy, lack of diverse staff representation (especially at senior levels), and histories of exclusion toward both staff and visitors.³ With the inadequacies of these old norms painfully on view, why would we want to “get back” to them? In a recent unconference provocatively titled “Death to Museums,” Porchia Moore, assistant professor of art history and museum studies and co-founder of the blog *Incluseum*, asked attendees to “collectively reject” the notion of normality (2020). “The things that made us normal before were the things that actually hurt our discipline,” Moore noted. “We normalized legacies of exclusion.

3 In recent years, a number of independent online platforms have arisen to host the writings of practitioners whose collective influence cannot be overstated. In addition to the *Incluseum* (<<https://incluseum.com>>), intensive discussion on museum purpose, including a focus on issues of racial equity and inclusion, can be found at: *Museums & Race: Transformation and Justice* (<museumsandrace.org>), *Museums as Sites of Social Action (MASS Action)* (<museumaction.org>), *Art Museum Teaching* (<<https://artmuseumteaching.com/>>) *Museum Hue* (<museumhue.com/blog>), and *Museum 2.0* (<museumtwo.blogspot.com>), among a great many others.

We normalized poor wages in the field. We normalized dominant white leadership. We normalized white supremacist workplace culture, and we normalized interrogating and examining cycle after cycle of exploring and talking about the notions of DEAI [Diversity, Equity, Access, and Inclusion] for 20 years, and I think it's time to allow ourselves to step away from that and build something completely new" (ibid.).

In the framework of social revolutions, it is too soon to talk of a 'new normal.' Our former practice belonged to an older paradigm, and we have yet to develop consensus around the new paradigm and its new norms. All is experimentation. Wide-ranging, contested, varied, and radical, current discussions in the museum world exhibit the characteristics of paradigm crisis, a seeming chaos in which competing ideas proliferate. This can be expected to continue until a new paradigm solidifies, built on new norms of practice that gradually prove themselves to be more useful. As Wood, Tisdale and Jones describe it, "The period of the paradigm crisis is uncertain but also highly relative and energizing. ... Everyone seems impatient and ready for change, but charting that path to change is difficult." (WOOD/TISDALE/JONES 2018: 4).

3.3 Dealing with Our Deep Structures

The motion toward an audience-centered paradigm drags against the inertia of museum management's deep structures. Prevailing management practices date to the revolution of "managerialism" beginning in the 1950s, the dawn of organizational theory. As private sector organizations grew more complex due to globalization and technology, the field of organizational development grew in response, creating tactics and principles for managing big endeavors. Managerialism emphasized "achieving results, creating clear goals and objectives, and identifying techniques to measure these" (PALMER 1998: 433). These ideas soon pervaded not-for-profit organizations. By the 1990s, the managerial revolution in museums had taken hold. Over the past twenty years, partly due to anti-taxation sentiment, the already low public funding for the arts has further declined by 16% (STUBBS/MULLANEY-LOSS). With what remained came more rigorous managerial expectations: detailed outcomes-based planning, fiscal transparency, demands for matching funds, excluded and externalized costs, and competition for scarce resources. Museum leadership programs and advanced degree programs in museum studies jumped in to convey these approaches, channeling managerial thinking and skills into the profession. Accreditation and

other institutional capacity-building programs also disseminated managerial practice.

These systems and their ‘best practices,’ developed to suit the paradigm of cultural transmission, became deep structures. Meanwhile, audience-driven sectors of the field ventured into fresh territory, as practitioners explored new, human-centered foundations for museum work. Conflict between workers in audience-facing divisions, and administrative leaders committed to the managerial approaches of the waning paradigm, is the inevitable result of frictions between the deep structures of the old paradigm and the evolution toward the new. That conflict cannot be resolved with the same set of management tools that created the former paradigm. We need new tools to build and sustain museum organizations that can do what our society now needs them to do.

3.4 Reframing Museum Management

As we test out more human-centered museum paradigms, we need to add sophisticated tools for identifying people’s needs, cultivating their contributions, and ensuring sensitive and relational work approaches. One of the elements needed for this expanded managerial toolkit is the use of management frames.

As developed by organizational theorists Lee Bolman and Thomas Deal in their landmark book *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, a management frame is “a set of ideas and assumptions that you carry in your head to help you understand and negotiate a particular territory. A good frame makes it easier to know what you are up against and, ultimately, what you can do about it” (BOLMAN/DEAL 2008: 13–16). In their wide study of for-profit and non-profit organizations, Bolman and Deal noticed that organizations tended to use different frames in decision-making, each reflecting a different ‘deep structure,’ or grounding metaphor for the organization. Bolman and Deal’s four frames are:

Structural

This frame likens an organization to a factory. Organizations exist to achieve defined goals and objectives, and increased efficiency and enhanced performance come from division of labor. Central coordination and control ensure that all parts work together. This frame values rationality, standardization, impersonal approaches over individual agendas, rigor, analysis, strategy, measurable goals, reporting lines, and procedures.

Political

This frame compares an organization to a jungle, where individuals and interest groups vie for resources based on different wants, values, and perceptions. This frame emphasizes conflict, conflict resolution, power, and alliance building to determine how resources are deployed. Bargaining, negotiation, and competition are key strategies.

Symbolic

This frame imagines organizations as temples, theatres, or carnivals, in which meaning is the most important value. An organization unfolds like a play, and culture unites its players, creating shared purpose and “a tapestry of secular myths” that help people collaborate to accomplish goals. Rituals, ceremonies, stories, play and celebration help people interact, find meaning, and make decisions.

Human Resource

Distinct from the management function called by the same name, this frame likens organizations to families or neighborhoods, and asserts that organizations exist to serve human needs. People and organizations need one another, and arriving at a good fit brings an even exchange of meaningful and satisfying work for employees, for the skills, talents, and energies organizations need to achieve their service goals.⁴

To Bolman and Deal, all four frames are equally important. Each offers problem-solving power. The ability of a manager or leader to shift between frames flexibly is critical to meeting complex challenges. Too often, they say, leaders rely on only one frame, a situation they call a “psychic prison” that cuts off possibilities. They write, “we cannot count the number of times managers have told us that they handled some problem the ‘only way’ it could be done. Such statements betray a failure of both imagination and courage and reveal a paralyzing fear of uncertainty. It may be comforting to think that failure was unavoidable and we did all we could. But it can be liberating to realize there is always more than one way to respond to any problem or dilemma” (BOLMAN/DEAL 2008: 19).

4 Adapted from Scouller and Chapman (n.d).

3.5 A Missing Tool: The Human Resource Frame

How do these frames show up in the managerial culture of American museums? Under the cultural transmission paradigm, intensified by the managerial revolution and its pressures, museums built organizational structures on the blueprints of the Structural and Political frames. Using Structural thinking, museums became more elaborately hierarchical and departmental and relied on best practices for productivity and accountability. Deploying the Political frame, museums have adopted a scarcity mentality, competing for and closely managing limited resources, and negotiating power among interest groups within and beyond the staff, such as donors, board members, or collectors. Museums have also called upon the Symbolic frame, using stories and imagery to win support, celebrate exhibitions and publications, and inspire the commitment of staff where compensation alone was not enough.

The Human Resources frame, though, is all but missing from the toolbox. Mounting evidence suggests that it is consistently the most weakly implemented of the four frames – and yet, the one most relevant to both the capacity of museums to reimagine their value during the COVID-19 pandemic and to the emerging humanistic paradigm.

In the Human Resources frame, people come first. This approach builds on insights developed by early 20th century researchers who challenged long-held beliefs that the relationship between workers and employers was purely transactional, an exchange of hard work and obedience to orders for a paycheck. Instead, they found that “people’s skills, attitudes, energy, and commitment are vital resources that can make or break an enterprise” (BOLMAN/DEAL 2008: 121-22). Bolman and Deal list the following assumptions of the Human Resource frame:

- Organizations exist to serve human needs rather than the converse.
- People and organizations need each other. Organizations need ideas, energy, and talent; people need careers, salaries, and opportunities.
- When the fit between individual and system is poor, one or both suffer. Individuals are exploited or exploit the organization – or both become victims.
- A good fit benefits both. Individuals find meaningful and satisfying work, and organizations get the talent and energy they need to succeed.

When employers neglect the Human Resources frame, workers respond in specific patterns of resistance, including physical and psychological withdrawal, sabotage, and the forming of alliances, such as labor unions (BOLMAN/DEAL 2008: 129–132). The current incidence of all of these responses in the museum world is, on its own, evidence that the frame has been insufficiently used. Museums are leaving a precision tool, one essential to realize the emerging paradigm, in the box.

3.6 Using a Human Resource Frame During the COVID-19 Crisis

A few leaders have made unexpected choices to preserve museum functions and staff during COVID -19. Their stories provide powerful examples of management approaches consistent with the Human Resource frame.

When the crisis descended, Matthew Naylor, President and CEO of the National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri, did not immediately lay off staff members. Instead, he reorganized his staff into five cross-functional teams for the duration of the closure (O'NEILL), ranging from a Building and Essential Infrastructure team (caring for grounds, buildings, security, and technology) to a Digitization and Transcription team assigned to scan and transcribing historic journals and letters. "Our goal was to balance our commitment to staff with the financial health of the organization," Naylor said. "As we were closed, we sought to focus on important mission-focused activities that support the long-term success of the institution, and respond to the needs of our audiences." 40% of the staff took on projects outside their regular roles and worked on teams with members of other departments, outside regular reporting relationships. "This has been a hugely productive time for the organization," Naylor said. "We have seen tremendous growth in online engagement and the development of new and exciting assets ... Overall, staff have found the interaction to be stimulating and satisfying."⁵

At the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA), a community-based interdisciplinary museum, CEO Lori Fogarty's response also bore hallmarks of the Human Resource frame. With the COVID-19 closure, the museum projected a \$1.5 million drop in operating income. Despite this, Fogarty and the board made the "extraordinary commitment" to retain 100% of the staff through the end of the museum's fiscal year, then more

5 Matthew Naylor, personal communication, 11 May 2020.

than three months away (FOGARTY 2020). The museum moved 106 full-time staff to part-time status, while retaining 44 part-timers. The senior team remained full-time, but took a pay reduction. Front-of-house staff were reassigned to new projects. Throughout closure, staff continued to receive health insurance, paid sick leave, and retirement contributions. Fogarty's messaging reflected the spirit of the Human Resource frame: "I believe these are the times that we must tap into our core values," she said, "and for the OMCA, those are values in equity and community, and we have made the decision to share in the sacrifice and take a collective approach. I believe all of our staff are mission-critical and that our amazing employees can contribute in impactful and meaningful ways at this time." (FOGARTY 2020: 01:55–02:20)

It is unlikely that museums can continue to support the same number of staff in the strained environment of the next few fiscal years. But even when they must make significant staff reductions, they can still use a Human Resource frame. Franklin Vagnone and the leadership team at Old Salem Museums and Gardens (OSMG), in Winston-Salem, South Carolina, committed themselves to underlying principles of the Human Resource frame at the outset of the crisis, carrying that intent through an institutional adjustment that wholly repositioned the museum for online learning, digital, and research experiences throughout the duration of the pandemic's impact. Placing education at the core, they created an entirely new staffing plan built on learning teams, adding positions in digital learning and African-American history. However, the new plan required eliminating 37 positions that had been devoted to onsite interpretation. Throughout the process, Vagnone communicated with staff regularly via video and written updates. Staff members had full transparency into the process of institutional adaptation. When layoffs were implemented, the leadership team gave the news to each staff member personally via phone call, including time for lengthy personal discussion and processing.⁶

Though the museum wanted to offer severance packages, they learned that any funds issued would reduce employees' unemployment benefits, amounting to a net zero. Instead, the museum partnered with a local community college, using the funds to create a package of career transition services unique to OSMG's staff, including career advising, resume editing, job search labs, coursework in high-demand fields, and the use of the university's career search resources. The museum is also

6 Franklin Vagnone, personal communication, 2 August 2020.

providing one year of mental health benefits through an Employee Assistance Program to both current employees and those laid off.

The Human Resource frame may allow leaders to shift from focusing on deficits and shortfalls, and instead find ways to benefit from investments already made in staff, as OSMG did by fundamentally reimagining their museum services. It's well established that turnover comes at high future cost, and recent research suggests that companies who avoid layoffs emerge stronger from downturns (SENIOR 2020). Similarly, museums that include a Human Resource frame in their short-term planning may emerge from the crisis in a stronger position than those that have made less-considered cuts. As Bolman and Deal observe, "[a] skilled and motivated workforce is a powerful source of strategic advantage." (BOLMAN/DEAL 2008: 135) Organizations that retain their most skilled and experienced staff members can better pivot to new realities, complete with institutional knowledge, existing relationships, and community connections.

3.7 Is This Really the Revolution We've Been Waiting For?

How do we know this moment might be a revolutionary that brings us a new paradigm, rather than just another time of incremental adjustment? According to theorists of revolutionary change, it takes two forces to create a true revolution: (1) internal changes that pull parts of a system out of alignment with each other, and (2) environmental changes that threaten the resources on which a system depends (GERSICK 1991: 21). At the time of the COVID-19 crisis, we have both.

Internal forces include the rising clamor, especially from entry-level and front-facing employees, for more equitable, sustainable, and less exploitive forms of employment. This in turn is partly fueled by external changes: extreme racial and economic inequality; increasing costs for housing, health care, and education; and a student loan debt crisis, all of which combine to make living on base-level museum wages more difficult than ever. Those on the lower end of the pay scale are out of alignment with those at the higher end, who have been slow to perceive that financial pressures on museum workers are more intense than they were in the past. Expectations for inclusion and psychological safety in the workplace are also growing as the field becomes gradually more diverse and the cultural assumptions of overwhelmingly white, affluent staffs are questioned and broadened.

Another lack of internal alignment has arisen around audiences and interpretation. As is widely known, museums are attended by a narrow and largely culturally monolithic swath of the United States population (DILENSCHEIDER 2019). White-dominant museum spaces have been unwelcoming to audiences of color. Conventional interpretation often defaults to colonialist and White supremacist perspectives, and can be directly at odds with the knowledges and perspectives of visitors. The rise of the “critical museum visitor,” (LINDAUER 2008) who sees and names exclusive practices after they have already been developed and made public, reflects the work of insular teams whose failure to connect leaves the work of critical interrogation and interpretive reframing to unpaid members of the public. Classic collections practices, too, pull against increasing moves toward greater access, to repatriation of cultural property, and to the allocation of resources where they can have greatest impact.

External changes in funding sources, attendance, and giving patterns have also been exerting pressure, but until recently they were slow-moving threats compared to COVID-19’s Godzilla. The pandemic brought the evaporation of visitation-based revenue; the challenge of creating structures, systems and routines for remote work; the need for workers to juggle child care, school, and work from home; an audience newly segmented by their different experiences of disease and quarantine; a stock market impact that made donors feel less secure about giving; cancelled fundraisers; and competition with many other sectors for support.

These internal and external changes are combining to break down the deep structures of museums and reassemble them into new forms. All of the conditions for revolutionary change are present. Some museums will not survive the crisis; for those who do, the question is: who will we be at the end of this? Will we heed the call to take apart the deep structures and alienating failures of twentieth-century managerialism, and rebuild museums to reflect the emergent values of the new human-centered paradigm?

4. A To-Do List for Museum Revolutionaries

Museums have tough decisions ahead. Support for cultural work over the next few years will be thin and unpredictable. Organizations will have to run lean. But if we fall back on the Structural frame and cut, cut, cut, we may destroy the very value that allows museums to argue

for their essential role. The present moment demands the use of all four frames, and especially a sincere commitment to the Human Resource frame, to deeply rethink museum purpose and practice, reimagining the museum as a more inclusive, sustaining, supportive workplace, capable of creating living, responsive connections to the people it serves. On the task list are several critical elements that will be required of future museum paradigms:

4.1 Make Real, Visible Change in Racial Equity

When the #BlackLivesMatter uprisings amplified issues of race and identity in the spring of 2020, many museums' responses lacked credibility precisely because of their own participation in and continuation of oppressive structures. Despite decades of incremental efforts towards increasing diversity in the museum field, museums as a group are still dominated by white people and culture, and managed by structures originating in white supremacy. This chronic fact has given rise to a slew of reform projects, reports, and studies, yet, change still moves slowly. As Joanne Jones-Rizzi and Gretchen Jennings wrote with exasperation in 2017, in the 32 years since the field was called to account by the seminal document *Excellence and Equity* (1992), change has barely materialized. Study after study finds an underrepresentation of marginalized identities, a near-dearth of people of color in senior leadership, a concentration of people of color in the lowest-paid jobs, pay disparities between white workers and workers of color, and a lack of authentic community relationships (JENNINGS/JONES-RIZZI 2017).

As museums regroup, internalize the meaning of #BlackLivesMatter, and reassess their relationships in the pandemic and post-pandemic environment, good intentions are not enough. Using the Human Resource frame, consider what kinds of presences and cultural knowledge museums will need to be effective. Note how every staffing decision influences the internal makeup of a museum and enhances, or limits, its capacities. Now is the time to look carefully at processes of recruitment, pipeline building, hiring, promotion and retention.⁷ Smithsonian Secretary Lon-

7 There are many free resources available that provide how-tos on inclusive hiring practice and building diverse organizations. Good places to start: Chronicle of Philanthropy's "How to Build a Diverse Nonprofit Staff" (<<https://www.philanthropy.com/resources/toolkit/how-to-build-a-diverse-nonprof/125>>) and Racial Equity Tools' "Organizational Change Processes," <<https://www.racialequitytools.org/act/strategies/organizational-change-processes>>.

nie G. Bunch III, in a plenary about racial justice and museums, urged listeners who want to respond to the challenges of our time to “get your own house in order. Make sure that your house, reflects the world that we think we serve ...Model yourself on the America you expect. Don’t model the America that looks like every other museum. Model the America you care about and respect” (COLE/BUNCH III/FOGARTY 2020).

4.2 Make Real, Visible Progress in Improving Compensation

The museum field in the US is a chronically underpaid profession. Since many museums are incorporated as independent nonprofit entities, they are not subject to government wage and benefit scales. For decades, many have struggled to pay competitive salaries, or for very small museums, any salaries at all. The field has depended on such incentives as “the freedom of the workplace, or the magnificent surroundings, or the flexible and varied job descriptions” to draw and retain a skilled workforce (FRIEDMAN 1994: 221). But in a time in which wage inequality and cost of living are rising sharply, performance expectations have increased, and scope has grown, compensation has stayed stagnant or declined. The field has become addicted to underpaid and unpaid labor, enabling disproportionately high output while concealing true costs to workers and society. Cultural labor movements in the US reflect the extremity of the problem; a new wave of museum unions along with alliances such as Museum Workers Speak and Art + Museum Transparency are challenging systemic shortcomings of a field that has so consistently overlooked the critical idea of the Human Resource frame: that organizations and workers need one another, and both must benefit from their exchange.⁸

Honoring the intent of the Human Resource frame will require leaders to reorganize compensation structures. Consider the ratio between the lowest-paid and highest-paid positions: is it reasonable for the scale and type of museum? As reported in *Incluseum* (2020), “the average museum CEO makes six times what the average museum administrative worker makes, and nine times what a front-of-house worker earns” Recently, museum activists identified ratios ranging from 7.3 to a shocking

8 Museum Workers Speak (<<https://museumworkersspeak.weebly.com>>), an informal alliance of museum workers, created a mutual aid fund for museum workers who lost employment in the COVID-19 crisis. It is one of many organizing efforts by museum workers participating in “employee activism,” ranging from unions within museums, “rogue”/pop-up conference sessions, un-conferences, and alliances focused on advancing racial equity, queer inclusion, disability access, visitor safety, and other human-centered projects in museums.

48.2.⁹ Now is the time to commit to salary review and rationalization, and set the goal of full salary transparency. Many museums have skeletons lurking in varied compensation agreements, where inequities, imbalances, and inconsistencies abound; it is time to begin evicting those skeletons, rationalizing compensation and instituting fair, observable criteria for pay scales and promotions. It is impossible to achieve equity without a clear, open and fair salary structure; as one nonprofit leader puts it, “confidentiality is the enemy of equity” (BELL 2020).

Also, museum employers should review the employment classifications they are offering. One-third of American workers now have an “alternative work arrangement” in the “gig economy,” in which the employer-employee relationship is based on fee for service, with no other obligations (PETEIGLIERI/ASHFORD/WRZESNIEWSKI 2018). Museums have been participating quietly in the gig economy to a surprising degree, not just as independent consultants and curators, but also freelance educators, teaching artists, art handlers, exhibition fabricators and installers, culinary services, event staff, cleaning and maintenance services, security guards, and café and retail staff. When their contracts are cancelled, they do appear in unemployment statistics as jobs lost, and museums do not have to report them as staffing reductions. During COVID-19 recovery, it will be tempting to stretch funds by using contractors semi-permanently instead of reinstating positions, threatening to solidify a two-tier field of precarious workers supervised by relatively secure employees. This could come to resemble the dystopian picture painted by museum thinker Dan Spock (2020) of a “Zombie museum,” in which the museum “shrinks to a skeleton crew of administrators buying services, with no workplace culture of expertise, commitment, vision and initiative.”

Museums may also be tempted to increase capacity by using volunteers. Some already critically rely on them. The Center for the Future of Museums (MERRITT 2019) reports that, by head count, *most* people who work in US museums are volunteers: depending on budget, six to eighteen of them for every paid staff member. Expanding voluntarism risks driving down the value of paid work and brings challenges of quality control, efficient use of resources, diversity, and representation. Rather than providing amateur education services, some volunteer programs

9 The anonymously sourced spreadsheet of CEO-to-worker pay ratios, titled *Indebted Cultural Workers: Calculate your salary*, can be accessed at <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1GQpS643AWTtwUxLA_OmVrYdck89yVWSYHdTd2_ETSCJE/edit#gid=1941786029>.

should be redeveloped as lifelong learning programs, friends' programs, social groups, host / greeter corps, or memberships. US museums should also consult legal counsel to ensure that their use of volunteers does not violate Fair Labor Standards Act protections that prevent paid workers from losing employment to volunteers.

4.3 Rethink Job Structures and Functions

COVID-19 was a forced experiment in organizational structures. Literally overnight, teams remixed around new digital and remote products, collectively realizing that departmental siloes were never sculpted in stone. Whether recovery means physical reopening or a shift to more virtual engagement, it's more possible than ever to fundamentally rethink the way museum work is shared.

Front-of-house workers, for instance, can apply their knowledge and expertise to visitor experience planning and feedback systems. Educators, designers, digital specialists and curators can partner to develop content-rich experiences – online, remote, or on-site. Facilities, security, housekeeping, exhibits, and operations staff might work more deeply together as Site Care teams. Administrative, finance, human resources, and office management departments might unite with development and collections functions, understood afresh as support infrastructure for audience services. Instead of across-the-board cuts, leaders can think about consolidating, recombining, and hybridizing jobs. Rather than making assignments based on title, staff might bid for team positions in “project marketplaces” (JESUTHASAN/MALCOLM/CANTRELL 2020).

Museums should also review part-time/full-time job structures, ensuring that part-time workers aren't a casual, disposable workforce, but an integral component. Examples abound in small museums, who often build full-time jobs from a few part-time jobs, reducing precarity, rewarding commitment and adding productivity and efficiency. As museums aspire to enrich the humanity of visitors, they must make the critical link to doing the same with internal employment practices and policies. All too often, these are pitted against one another.

4.4 Embrace Community Care

“Community care” is a concept emanating from social justice movements and human service nonprofits (MURAWSKI 2017). Redirecting attention from the individualistic notion of “self-care,” community care recognizes that a staff, in addition to being employees, also forms a com-

munity with needs for safety, comfort, and satisfaction. As nonprofit coach Jess Ayden Li puts it, “The concept of community care is a group of people ... who commits to supporting each other, is accountable to care for one another, holds space for each other, and creates areas for community healing” (DOCKRAY 2019).

For museum staff, the stakes are rising. As interpretive stances become less neutral, they present stronger messages – and that means more sensitive topics, stronger visitor pushback, and more difficult facilitation on the museum floor, a burden that tends to fall most on the staff who interact directly with the public. Even staff behind the scenes are challenging exclusionary narratives, building alignment with board members and donors, and doing more with less – leading to a widespread *pre*-COVID-19 epidemic of overload and burnout.

The Human Resource frame can help museums build care mechanisms for staff. These could include more open meetings, individual check-ins, spaces for decompression and quiet reflection or recovery from aggressive interactions, services to support social-emotional well-being and long-term professional development. Museums can also draw on the Symbolic frame to create more ritual and ceremony recognizing important moments in the life of the community. Take inspiration from a piece by Mark Katrikh, “Creating Safe(r) Spaces for Visitors and Staff in Museum Programs,” which describes how the Museum of Tolerance created a model of “five layers of care,” considering each participant from the museum guide to the individual visitor, the group, the museum, and the world (KATRIKH 2018).

A note about senior managers and directors: in a time of passionate critique, directors and senior managers, too, need community care. They are tasked to support not only the museum’s workforce, but the continued existence of the museum itself as an entity with a social purpose. Negotiating between the present and future value of that purpose and the capacity and needs of the present workforce is a difficult and sometimes thankless task. Leaders are working within the challenges posed by our political and economic systems to honor all of their obligations; available choices, even with the most creative and humanistic thinking, are often limited. Using a Human Resource frame means recognizing in leaders the same humanity, and the same needs, that all museum workers have. In fact, employing the values of the Human Resource frame can open up new possibilities for distributed leadership and collaborative interaction, allowing leaders to explore new ways of working, as well. As one effort to derive lessons from the pandemic response, Mike Murawski

has begun a multi-part inquiry about leadership alternatives beyond the Board/CEO model. The first installment, “Upending Our Ideas of Leadership,” was published online on 27 July 2020 (MURAWSKI 2020).

5. Puffing This Crisis to Work

No matter how effectively we use the Human Resource frame, museums, like all organizations, will have to negotiate their survival under whatever conditions our unfolding future imposes. It would be naïve to think that all museums will survive, that no more layoffs and furloughs will be necessary, or that there will always be a museum job for everyone who wants and deserves one. Uncertainty remains, not only about COVID-19, but about the future approaches American society will take to funding its cultural institutions.

Yet the notion that we are in a revolutionary crisis phase between paradigms provides hope. This chaotic period is part of the breakdown of outmoded systems, and it holds opportunity for those willing and able to reimagine museum work and management. The urgency offers a tailwind for those thinking about radically reformative steps; there may be more support for experimentation now than at any other time. As Winston Churchill advised, we should “never let a good crisis go to waste.”

Replacing deep structures committed to cultural transmission with those committed to human growth and agency may require different business models. In the new operating environment, we can no longer assume the same flow of earned revenue or the same levels of physical public participation. This may mean devising previously unimagined ways of sustaining museums whose deep purpose remains focused on the human good.

After years of incremental change, layering a frosting of educational services onto the deep structure of cultural-transmission museums, we may now be at the point of dismantling and rebuilding those deep structures, this time with the needs and uses of living human beings as the deep structure itself. Rather than cutting back to a dormant “core” of buildings and collections, future-oriented museum workers at all levels can help reposition the museum so that its new “core” includes the shared culture, understandings, values, ideas, and principles kept alive and active within the human beings who work there and the communities who so deeply value them.

As someone whose career took an unexpected turn due to the pandemic, I have joined many others in using this time for study, questioning, reflection and rededication, digging deep to understand the roots of our present pain, including my own neglect of Human Resources framing, and committing to finding another path. In this liminal time, it's encouraging to see places where museum people talk exploding with creative (and creatively destructive) energy. Despite the many injuries and traumas absorbed by the field's impassioned and skilled workers, we are still willing to dream, re-engage, and re-design. It is impossible to know how our field might be shaped five years from now; but if we seek to live up to the promises we've made and the stories we tell ourselves, centering our work on humans – not collections, buildings, management structures or strategic plans – will be non-negotiable.

This piece aims to synthesize ideas from dozens, if not hundreds, of colleagues whose thinking and writing is contributing to ideas about future museum paradigms. I would like to thank all those cited for their work, as well as the many colleagues who have discussed this article and its ideas with me at length, offering critical feedback, and also those who have shared their thinking and questions in the ongoing discourse.

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