

Steps for Building Empathetic Museums

Goals:

1. Build awareness
2. Practice empathy
3. Convert other workers at your museum to empathetic practice
4. Change policy
5. Prepare/plan responses to public needs

Concrete Steps:

- Read *Characteristics of the Empathetic Museum* one-page handout and either reflect individually on what it means for your institution or discuss it with other colleagues attending AAM.
- Take the UC Berkeley Greater Good Science Center's empathy assessment:
http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/quizzes/take_quiz/14
- Practice empathy. Talk to a strangers regularly. Read stories that challenge you to consider the personal experience of people who lead very different lives than yours. Imagine each of those people visiting your museum.
- Talk about this session with colleagues from your department. Maybe changing your whole museum feels daunting, but can you plan some steps your *department* can take to become more empathetic?
- Learn from examples of empathetic museums. Perhaps you could generate discussion at your museum after a group listens to podcasts or reads guest posts.
 1. Listen to the October 31, 2014 podcast on Carol Bossert's Museum Life radio show entitled "Listening to Communities in New Ways" with Bill Booth and Kristin Leigh. And to the February 6, 2015 Museum Life conversation between Carol and Nina Simon on Nina's work in connecting her museum with its community. Both podcasts can be found here and are listed according to date. <http://www.voiceamerica.com/show/2245/museum-life>
 2. Read guest posts from Melanie Adams (December 16, 2014) of the Missouri History Museum and Deborah Schwartz (January 6, 2015) of the Brooklyn Historical Society on Museum Commons. <http://www.museumcommons.com>
- Identify any existing empathy "bright spots" at your museum--things you're doing right. Celebrate them, and keep searching out and celebrating them as you move forward.
- Do an informal assessment of your museum's institutional body language. Ask staff, constituents, and visitors how you are perceived, but also ask non-museum goers--those who may feel the museum is not for them.

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- Create a task force to improve institutional body language. This task force might institute benchmarking initiatives, hold internal conversations and trainings, develop tools to be used across the institution, address communication strategies and hiring practices, and more.
- Look at the make-up of your Board, staff (at all levels, including service personnel), and volunteers. Are there immediate steps you could take to make them more representative of the community you currently serve? The community you would like to serve?
- Put systems in place to help you listen to your public audience and understand what they are concerned about right now:
 1. Add a broad range of community voices (mainstream and marginalized) to your Twitter and Facebook feeds, read the op-ed sections of local papers, and seek out other local sources of public discussion.
 2. Consider whether there are any museum projects for which advisory groups from the local community could be created.
 3. Investigate whether there are specific dates throughout the year that have particular significance to subgroups within your community (anniversaries of important historical or political events, special festival, ethnic, religious, or parade days). Put them on the museum shared calendar and think about ways your institution could acknowledge, support, and/or observe these special days.
 4. Ask yourself and colleagues if there are issues in your larger community that are being discussed. Do you have relevant collections? Do you have facilities and resources that might be appropriate?
- Take steps to connect your museum to the broader community. Network with other organizations that serve diverse groups within your community; regularly attend meetings with civic organizations, local officials, police force, school and library leaders, religious and community organizations; start asking what community needs are going unmet.
- Create a rapid response team (with members from across the institution) tasked with listening out for and addressing emerging needs/concerns of your community through programming, external communication, etc.
- Start a conversation with any relevant staff about addressing community needs in your museum's disaster plan.