

So You Want to Be a Director Someday?

Identifying the attributes, skills, and experience needed to succeed.

By Diane Frankel and Linda Sweet

As consultants in executive searches for museums, we have spent many years working with boards to determine what it takes to be a successful museum director. The first question we ask individuals is “Why do you want to become a director?” The responses are always revealing, ranging from “I know that I could do a better job than my current director” to “I have a vision, and I want to carry it out.” In these responses, the motivation is similar: I want to lead. I want to be in charge.

This drive has always struck us as critical. Without it, aspiring directors are unlikely to focus objectively on the skills and experience they’ll need to plan their careers. Nor will they build the passion and commitment necessary to compete for the position or be successful once in it.

The question a search committee typically begins with is “What do we need in our next director?” They are referring to a combination of personal attributes and experience. But the position descriptions they usually develop concentrate on the responsibilities to be carried out.

In this article, we will try to identify both the actual experiences and the more subjective characteristics that can help future directors think more comprehensively about who they are, what they need to know, and how they can arrive at their destinations. We acknowledge that while we are focusing on characteristics that apply to those wanting to become museum directors, these same attributes, skills, and experience apply to leaders at all levels, regardless of where you are in your career or your current position.

Among the critical characteristics for success as a museum director are:

Passion

A director must be a passionate advocate for the institution, collections, audiences, communities, and museum field. They have to believe strongly in the mission and be able to clearly articulate it and its importance to all stakeholders, including the board, funders, community, and staff. A director spends a great deal of time overseeing all aspects of the museum’s operations and programs.

At the same time, the director fosters leadership throughout the institution to implement the strategic vision and achieve its goals. As an advocate for the institution, the director has to show passion for all parts of the job. This passion takes the form of enthusiasm and optimism, which translates into energy to move forward and excitement around the effort.

Vision

A director must have a clear direction about where they want to take the museum. They have ideas and are excited about them, but the vision is not theirs alone. It emerges from observations, from discussions both internally and externally, and from their own experiences. Their vision will guide the course for the future and must be set into a clear, thoughtful, and exciting plan that spells out how it will be attained. The director must establish both a vision and plan that are broad and flexible enough to incorporate new opportunities and possibilities while anticipating unexpected obstacles.

Perseverance

Perseverance in the face of obstacles is critical for a museum director. It is easy to get waylaid, especially if others

believe adhering to the plan is too hard or even impossible. By providing a steady course of action, the director helps everyone work with longer-term goals in mind.

Of course, blind adherence to a course of action without listening to others or looking at the external environment is not at all what we are advocating. Rather, we are suggesting that if a course of action has been agreed upon, even though the course may be difficult, it is important for the director to persevere and help others push forward.

Patience

Reaching institutional goals takes patience, especially if those goals are new or potentially risky. The director oversees a great many pieces moving at once, and it is their responsibility to ensure that anyone and everyone impacted by decision-making is on board. The director must be patient and persuasive, often taking or allowing the necessary time to bring people around to accepting a new plan or program, or a new way of working. Patience means getting people involved early in the process. It also means the director must be a good listener, fair, open, and honest.

Decisiveness

A director must be willing to make decisions, but must do it through a process that involves gathering the necessary facts, listening to others’ opinions, weighing options, assessing the outcomes, and recognizing that there are no “perfect” decisions. Once a decision is made, it is time to move on to the next decision.

Career Path: Educator-Turned-Director

By Nathan Richie

Around age 10, I got it into my head that I wanted to be a ranger in the National Park Service (NPS). I loved visiting the amazing natural and cultural treasures and relished the great adventures with my family. So, I started a trajectory to follow that career path.

In high school, I worked as a tour guide and volunteered at zoos to gain any experience that could help me become a ranger. In college, I pursued a degree in natural resources and secured two back-to-back internships with NPS. I loved both experiences and learned more about myself than I anticipated. I also learned an important lesson: I didn't really like working for the National Park Service. Although I loved interpretation, nature, and visitors, I didn't like the isolation, the seasonality of the work, and the intense competition for jobs. Lesson learned: discovering what you don't like is as important as discovering what you do like.

I decided to leap into the museum field, which turned out to be a great career move for me. When I graduated from college, I moved to California and earned an MA in museum studies from the John F. Kennedy University. After finishing my thesis, I followed my girlfriend (now wife) to Indiana.

After a few panicked months of looking for work, I landed my first true museum job as a curator at a small art museum. Although I was less than enthusiastic about living in Indiana, I learned another valuable lesson: by moving to a less sought-after part of the country, I was able to step into a more senior position as a recent graduate than if I had stayed in highly desirable, market-saturated

San Francisco. I also learned I enjoy being a big fish in a small pond, and that a smaller town affords more opportunities to become involved in the community and make a difference.

After five years, I moved to Chicago to accept a position at a start-up museum. It was a step down in title but a huge step up in pay (and a fun change of scenery). I was promoted to a departmental director and became a supervisor. Managing people was a new frontier for me and a skill that did not come naturally. One of the best pieces of advice I was given: emphasize individual strengths, tackle weaknesses head on, and don't fall back on familiar, comfortable roles. I spent a great deal of time developing leadership skills—a practice I consider a work in progress.

In 2010, I found a great job opportunity that allowed me to return home to Colorado. I accepted a director position at a history museum in a beautiful mountain town. I'm not sure when I decided that I wanted

to become a director, but I knew I wanted to expand my horizons, skill set, and marketability. I also wanted to earn more money.

Being a director gives me a great deal of empathy toward all of my former bosses—the ones I liked and the ones I didn't like. I never realized how many decisions I would confront on a daily basis. I even find that I have to make decisions about what I am going to make decisions about. And I have to confront the reality that I can never please everybody.

Ironically, it was my love of education and exhibits that drew me to the museum field, but now I spend only a fraction of my time doing that type of work. But, as an educator-turned-director, I am able to effect institutional change that prioritizes our educational mission. I can move forward agendas of audience advocacy, participation, and community relevancy. I've also found new creative outlets that are even more challenging and just as rewarding, such as forging relationships with community and business leaders, shaping institutional vision and setting priorities, and building and growing resources that allow the rest of the staff to carry out our important mission.

I've also discovered that small and midsized museums can be more responsive, fleet, and risk-tolerant than our larger counterparts. I think small museums that show focus, discipline, and passion are well positioned to be incubators of innovation and future industry leaders.

Nathan Richie is director of the Golden History Museums in Golden, Colorado.



Leadership

The attributes outlined above are among the characteristics of a good leader. A director should be a leader, but not every leader is a director. A leader is the person who provides direction and motivates others, and then guides and supports them. A leader makes sure everyone involved is provided with the necessary resources to do their jobs and achieve the institution's goals.

A director who is a leader recognizes the strengths and weaknesses of the institution and its people, and sets goals and allocates tasks accordingly. They must be willing to manage risk and to cope with uncertainty. Being a leader is essential to being a successful museum director.

Some people are born leaders; most are not, but over time they can attain the characteristics of a leader through

awareness, objectivity, attention, and effort. The important message here is that being a leader of a museum takes dedication, a willingness to learn, and tolerance of mistakes. Tolerance of ambiguity also is a key attribute of a museum director, as is the ability to continuously strengthen oneself and the institution.

Management

To be successful, a director also needs management skills and experience. They need to understand and be able to meet the basic expectations for a good manager. Typically, a board wants to be sure the new director can take on the following responsibilities:

- Oversee the development and management of a vital and engaging exhibition and education program.
- Assure the preservation, conservation, and growth of the collection and

the appropriate use and care of the facility.

- Recruit, retain, and provide support for a professional staff and take responsibility for hiring, evaluating, and terminating staff.
- Prepare an annual operating budget as well as capital and project budgets, and monitor and dispense institutional funds in a prudent manner.
- Keep the board abreast of national and regional trends as well as developments that affect the museum, support and motivate the members of the board, and work with them to build the capacity of the board.
- Supervise and actively participate in comprehensive fundraising and audience development programs.
- Maintain the highest ethical and legal standards in all professional actions of the staff and board, and in the corporate actions of the museum.



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- Work with the board, staff, and community to develop and implement a strategic plan.
- Be the chief spokesperson of the museum.

Personnel, fundraising, planning, marketing, communications, finance—all are areas that candidates for directorships must be able to demonstrate mastery of, or at least the potential for achievement. In addition, professional expertise in a relevant subject area and in the operational and/or programmatic work of the museum is essential.

Paths

There are many paths to the director's office. More often than not, the best person to be a museum director has prior experience working in a museum. The director can come from the curatorial ranks, from education, or from the

business side of the museum, and will have spent five to ten years in positions with increasing responsibility and authority. Along the way, the aspiring director will need to take on tasks that involve administration, budgeting, fundraising, and staff supervision, and will have found opportunities to engage with the board and with the public.

Years ago, an individual could be in the "right place at the right time" and land the perfect job or be hired for a directorship without the relevant experience; today, that is highly unlikely. Almost all directors have graduate degrees in a content area, arts administration, museum education, or management. Some have multiple degrees, and they have gained experience by running a department or division.

Mentors

Identifying a mentor and calling

upon that individual for advice can be invaluable. A senior professional with experience and credibility can provide insights and objective advice, help with important decisions, suggest others to talk with, identify opportunities, and act as a reference. Careers seldom follow a straight line. Interests change, opportunities present themselves, and unexpected decisions need to be made. One mentor may be right for one segment of a career. Someone else may be more helpful at another.

Diane Frankel is an associate and Linda Sweet is a partner at Management Consultants for the Arts. This article is adapted from a chapter in A Life in Museums: Managing Your Museum Career (Greg Stevens and Wendy Luke, ed., 2012, The AAM Press), available in the AAM Bookstore online: bit.ly/ALifeinMuseums



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