Conflict in the House

by Barbara Cohen-Stratyner

Barbara Cohen-Stratyner *is Judy R. and Alfred A. Rosenberg Curator of Exhibitions, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. She may be contacted at bcohenstratyyner@nypl.org.*

Team planning is now an accepted tool for exhibition development and design. So why are we discussing it in an issue on exhibition frictions? As we all know, even the best managed teams can go off track due to a variety of internal conflicts. Many of these are discussed in other articles in this issue. My particular focus is a discussion of the importance of including a wider array of in-house staff in early planning, and making sure they and outside firms are able to communicate their expertise to each other to best work on an exhibition.

When developers/designers on an exhibition project have reached a consensus through their planning process, the results have already been imbued with great power and "shared authority," to use Ellen Todd's phrase (2004, p.140). The concept has become married to the visualization. But there are potential landmines here. Although the firm has seen the space and may have prepared its own measurements, that drawing or model will not represent the actual gallery conditions. The in-house team then looks over the designs, notes potential problems and develops questions and solutions. They may provide logistical reasons that something cannot happen in the space, with useable suggestions for accommodation. However, the opportunity for collaborative re-design may have passed. Each implementation decision becomes more difficult as the emotional baggage piles up. The house electrician, security, shipping and art handlers feel defensive; the outside developer/designers feel defensive. All involved see themselves as victims and rescuers of the project. Although these are perfectly nice people, they are muttering (or, if you are lucky, swallowing) phrases like "They think they know it all" or "They didn't ask, so I didn't tell!"

Even in the enlightened museum world, there can be prejudices based on perceived class, education level, language, age, or race. There can be conflict between project-based and full-time unionized employees. In a tense environment, it is also very possible that collaborators will interpret even factual disagreements as rising from prejudices. It is the joint responsibility of project managers for both the museum and the outside firm to foster respect and trust.

Inclusion of the house staff that understands the facility's logistics at an earlier phase can solve some of these problems. A mutually respectful expert-to-expert conversation should precede the initial planning meetings. If the staff can meet with the developers immediately after signing, information can be shared and the concept will fit better into the host space and institution. The developer/design firm should be represented by the staff member who will supervise that project. An expanded in-house team should include: security, facility maintenance, electrician, shipping or loading dock manager, in-house installers, media and/or playback staff, and conservator. Depending on the size of the institution, some of these functions may be performed by the same staff.

One of the three stages of team development, as delineated in the literature of team dynamics (see box p.38) is knowledge-based trust. Although it focuses on confidence-building and behavior predictions, I would use that term in its more pragmatic meaning. The more clear information that can be shared, the better the team can function.

Commit the team to actions and attitudes designed to share logistical information and expand the general knowledge base. If you are

A GOOD PROJECT FOR AN AAM TEAM

Much of the basic information that needs to be shared by the in-house team with the development/design team can be found in the AAM Registrars' Committee Standard Facilities Report. However, Facilities Reports are generally provided by the host institution's registrar to the registrar of lending institutions and do not circulate to other staff offices and consultants. I suggest that the appropriate Standing Professional Committees collaborate and, with the permission of the Registrar's PC, adapt the Facilities Report for more general use.

a well-managed, efficiently convened team, these will seem self-evident. If they elicit bad memories of tense installations, consider revising your teams' procedures? conversations? in the shared work space.

Communication Check-List
The following is a kind of check-list exhibition planners can use to allay the potential frictions that arise when on-the-ground staff are not consulted or communicated with in the early stages of exhibition planning:

Language It is astounding how much both museums and development/design firms employ internal conversations and idioms that are inexplicable or misleading to collaborators. So the first commitment should be to establish a shared vocabulary. Make sure that words with multiple meanings are clarified. The classic museum example is the word "scaffolding." To education and curatorial staff, it is the core principle of life-long learning. To installers, scaffolding is just scaffolding. Share idioms used by design teams and staff, explain common acronyms/nicknames, and clarify names for areas within the facility, such as floor designations.

Documents with Annotations These documents are provided to outside development/design firm. Make sure that you augment them with input and conversation with in-house staff.

Floor plan
- Is floor actually level? Are angles really 90 degrees?
- Is weight-bearing capability even throughout the space?
- Are there areas which are blind to security cameras/guards?

A strobe light fire alarm (above) and people counter electric eye (below) ruin the symmetry of Pentagram's design for **Lincoln Center: Celebrating 50 Years in the Oenslager Gallery** *at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, 2009. Photograph by Carmen Chiu.*

- How do the doors open/close? Cite angles, clearances, and directions of openings.

Elevations and wall plans
- What are the materials of the surface, substrates and structure?
- Is weight-bearing capability evenly distributed throughout the walls?
- Provide elevations and cross-sections showing depths of kick plates, lips, hanging ridges, etc. in white box neutral galleries and all architectural detail in historic buildings.

Ceiling and reflective ceiling plans
- How flexible is the placement of lighting track and instruments?
- What is the weight-bearing capability of the ceiling? Or the light tracks? Is it

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evenly distributed?
- What is the maximum height and maximum clearance of ceiling and instruments?

It is the in-house staff's responsibility to point out whether there is anything on the floor, walls, or ceiling that does not appear on the plans! In general, there are a surprising number of things that have been added to the gallery but not to the architectural plans. They can include, but not be limited to, occupancy statements, funder statements, hygrothermagraphs or other data-loggers, visitor counters, and bright orange fire alarm signage. These tend to be concentrated at the entrance where they can wreak havoc on designers' desired symmetry, graphics, and special effects.

Casing and modular systems
- Provide all dimensions—internal, external.
- Specify hardware and the availability of tools and keys, especially for proprietary systems.

What Needs to Be Discussed—Expert to Expert

The power grid
- The amount of power available in superstructure and in discrete areas;
- The placement of power availability in gallery—on walls, on floor, in ceilings;
- Any limits on individual power sources;
- Control of power during installation/ de-installation, and when the gallery is open to the public, i.e. who can turn it on, and who can turn it off?
- Is the gallery powered and unpowered separately from the facility as a whole? Does any of the powered equipment require a cool-off period?

Logistics of physical access
- What are the dimensions and regulations of the institution's loading dock, freight elevator, and entrance door(s)?
- What are the optimal routes for deliveries of artifacts? For storage facility? Do they go through public areas?
- What are the optimal times and worst times for deliveries and moving equipment and art? This is especially important if there are public areas between the freight elevator and gallery doors.
- Are there alternative entrances or exits? Who needs to be alerted or asked for access to them?
- Are there regulations or practices concerning public streets or roads during installation and de-installation?
- Are there regulations concerning trash removal during installation and de-installation? Re-cycling? Dumpsters?
- Are there any special circumstances outside the facility that will affect physical access? Construction? Traffic?

Security
- Who manages guard schedules and rounds?
- Who can make changes to those schedules if entering early or working late?
- Who has the authority to enforce fire regulations? What are the rules for fire-retardant materials in the gallery?

Staffing and physical access
- Who may run loading dock lift and/or freight elevator?
- Who may schedule deliveries, traffic, and access to the galleries?
- Who has to be notified and with how much advance notice?
- What is the work day schedule? Who can

A platform brings this spectacular costume for Queen Elizabeth I dangerously close to the low hanging track lights in **Curtain Call: Celebrating a Century of Women Designing for Live Performance** *at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, 2009.*

extend the working day?
- What is the availability of staff—what are their other responsibilities?
- Who schedules the other responsibilities?
- Are there collective bargaining regulations?
- Who can approve scheduling and overtime?

Cleaning schedules, materials, and responsibilities
- Is the gallery cleaned during installation?
- When the gallery is cleaned during the run, who is responsible for floors, windows, and ceilings?
- When the gallery is cleaned during the run, who is responsible for gallery case work?
- Are there house regulations or practices concerning "green" or toxic materials?
- Are there development/design firm practices concerning "green" or toxic materials that they expect staff to follow?

Sharing tools and equipment
- Are there house rules based on OSHA and/or local regulations?
- Are there house rules based on insurance policies?
- Are there house rules based on collective bargaining?
- Module, substrate systems, and connectors?
- When using proprietary or unusual hardware, who will provide tools and equipment?
- Can in-house staff keep specialized tools for the run of the exhibition in case of cleanings or emergencies?

Computer/internet access
- Is there WiFi and e-mail? How can it be facilitated for work area during installation/ de-installation?
- Is it available for the public as part of the exhibition?
- How reliable is it? Are there filters in place that could impact access to Internet or WiFi?

Media and Playback
- What are the pre-existing types of equipment and conditions? How does play-back usually work in the gallery?
- Who is providing equipment? Back-up equipment?
- Is equipment programmed for the length of the run? If so, who can re-program it for special events?
- Is there access to equipment for day-to-day

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Reference:
Todd, E. W. (Winter 2004).Visual display and exhibition politics in the Smithsonian's *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* [exhibition]. ***Radical History Review,*** 88 (1), 139-162.

maintenance, such as re-set timer-based play-back?

Lighting

- What is available? Be prepared to share specifications and manufacturers' information sheets.
- Is there a proprietary system? How can additional equipment be ordered?
- How can additional lights be ordered?
- How much can be used? Who decides—designers or electricians?
- How much should be used? Who decides—designers, electricians or conservators?

Breakdowns and de-installations

- Whose responsibility are they?
- Will the fabricators and installers be the same for the de-installation? If not, schedule another set of information meetings with the de-installers.
- What are the regulations regarding disposal of materials inside the institution? Outside the institution? Recycling laws? Dumpsters?

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Conclusion

One role of the exhibition team is to facilitate the development and implementation of the best possible project for the institution. How can we ensure that we employ the best possible group dynamics to facilitate the team's work with the institution's staff? Mutually respectful communication is the key. But the sharing of expertise has to be scheduled in a way that gives the process a solid base. By including house staff in the earliest stages of team exhibition development, we can improve the results for its creators and the audience.

Conflict in the House was written with input from staff members Michael Diekmann, Thomas Gordon, René Ronda, Herbert Ruiz, Andrew Tortoriello, and Donald Vlack.

Other Resources on Team Management

There are three sets of literature on team management—one is specific to museums, one is written on the for-profit world and focuses on product development, and one is created for the non-profit field and focuses on mission-based planning. The ***Exhibitionist*** issue of Spring 2002 (volume 21, no. 1) includes articles and process charts representing temporary and permanent exhibitions in various sized museums. They divide project development into three basic phases—Proposal/Concept, Design, and Production/Implementation. As well as the additional pragmatic articles in the ***Exhibitionist*** over the years, much of the museum literature tends to deal with team function as it relates to controversial exhibitions. The study of management outside of museums provides extremely valuable suggestions on team assembly, protocol, dynamics and maintenance. I have found that writings on corporate virtual teams are surprisingly apt for museum team work since they assume that the projects constitute only a part of the staff member's responsibilities. Consult the free on-line source www.managementhelp.org.