Team Building: Thoughts on Working Well With Others

by Rich Faron and Susan Curran

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A working title has popped into someone's head. Funding is in place. You've got deadlines penciled in all over next year's calendar. Lucky you: You've been assigned to a Project! Maybe it's an exhibition on the history of American theaters; maybe it's a series of science programs for kids; maybe it's a set of interactive field guides to the birds of Kazakhstan. Whatever's next up on your schedule, one thing is sure. It may not take a whole village to launch that baby, but you can safely bet it will take a team.

Most museum workers find out in a hurry that they can't accomplish much all alone. Modern not-for-profit business management hinges on personalized professional relationships among people working together, however loosely, as part of a team. The key values of trust, cooperation and understanding represent best practice for museum teams reaching "outside the walls" to forge useful connections beyond the boundaries of the organization. It's a given that successful outreach efforts require museum staffs to build solid long-term relationships with members of the community.

But what about building relationships on the inside? Do museum professionals recognize the importance of internal connections for success? Do they realize that networks among co-workers demand--and deserve--as much effort as attention as partnerships developed with outside folks?

When we work well with others, success follows

Believe it: It is always—repeat, always—worthwhile to reach out to co-workers, inside your own department and out, to create relationships and build bridges. It is equally worthwhile to work hard to keep those bridges open and strong. In many cases, this may be the one true path to on-the-job success. In museums, the need to work well with others seems to be especially true for staff in public programming, with specific implications for exhibition and education staff.

In response to recent economic pressures, exhibitions and related educational programs no longer function strictly as platforms for mission-based programming. Today, we've come to expect new exhibitions and other public efforts to drive attendance, push revenue, and attract new markets through advertising and outreach. To better confront these heightened expectations, exhibition departments often seek new partnerships inside the museum. A typical American museum nowadays includes departments, or at the very least individuals, that perform roles in administration, development, education, exhibitions, marketing, public relations, and public programming. By networking across these departmental lines, exhibit planners can transcend the organizational framework of traditional museum infrastructure.

In the end, a successful project results from assembling a team that pulls together to work together. In making exhibitions, you can go for broke--install the latest mind-boggling technology at a cost of millions of dollars, whip up nifty interactive devices to communicate your smartest colleague's hot-off-the-press research, hatch great ideas yourself every morning in the shower—but you can bet that the exhibition that best reaches your visitors, the one that succeeds, is the product of a good team. Given that, the bells and whistles don't matter so much.Museum Explorer has worked on many different kinds of exhibitions, from

Go ahead, get goofy! A little silliness goes a long way toward stoking camaraderie. At the NAME workshop, participants role-played staff positions outside their comfort zone. Try this in your own workplace and see what develops. (Paper hats optional.) Photo by Museum Explorer Inc./2007.

25,000 square-foot mega-installations with staffs in the hundreds and budgets in the millions, to single-room displays in small museums with staffs of just a few people and budgets to match. Without exception, every successful project—whether it was big, little or somewhere in between—resulted from teams that communicated relentlessly with one another, trusted one another and collaborated with one another. Those exhibitions worked.

There's no magic in team building—just commitment

So... How do you build a good team? In our experience, it usually happens from the ground up, from workers eager to rethink and retool their organizations in an effort to build a more integrated network of human and material resources, a network that will allow museums to compete creatively for that precious share of audience time.

Over and over, we see that museum exhibition and education professionals long for fresh ideas and new ways of developing, adapting and building cross-departmental partnerships within their own institutions. In the face of heavy competition from an ever-expanding entertainment marketplace, the traditional top-down hierarchy just isn't very effective any more.

Five Ts for successful teams

At the NAME workshop during the 2007 AAM meetings in Chicago, Museum Explorer identified the five Ts of great teamwork:

Talent
Tools
Talk
Time
Trade

We developed the five Ts, drawn from real-life workday situations, as part of an ongoing attempt to explore in detail how teams can strengthen cross-departmental relationships. Such strong, positive relationships foster the development of the fresh, alternative, relevant, and customized educational content that inspires and excites museum visitors. And teams of creatively deployed staff can deliver what audiences pay good money to see: interesting, engaging exhibitions. Exhibitions with heart.

The first T: Talent

Once your team has been assigned, begin by identifying the strengths each member brings to the group. This is perhaps the most critical step in the team-building process. It's easy to get hung up on each other's shortcomings, so make a concerted effort to find the strengths each person brings to the table. Beware of making assumptions based on job titles or positions within your institution. Instead, be open-minded; ignore titles and academic qualifications when you can.

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Sometimes the best ideas come from the person who's just beginning to climb the institutional ladder, or who perhaps isn't very interested in doing much climbing at all. Remember that job titles and academic degrees alone bestow neither enthusiasm nor imagination.

Who are those other people at the table? Okay, you know their names, but who are they *really*? Engage in conversations to uncover hidden talents. What experiences, skills, hobbies and passions does each member bring to the team? Discover experiences that, within the usual workday, have no forum for being shared; skills that are never required on the job; hobbies that no one ever asks about over lunch; passions that don't get expressed in the daily grind. Who knew that Alan, the security guard, goes home every night and does the **New York Times** crossword puzzle … in ink … in ten minutes flat? Or that Beverly, the PR person, spends entire weekends watching birds and volunteering with a local wildlife rescue group? And how interesting that Michiko, the museum educator, spent three years as an apprentice electrician after she graduated from high school!

Once you've gotten to know one another, review your findings as a group. Decide whether your team has the skills and talents necessary to complete your particular project. Yes? Great! No? Then you have some choices to make, and maybe some problems to solve. Does your museum have a sizable staff and extensive resources? Perhaps you can return to your manager with the information gathered from your team assessment and request any necessary supplemental support. Is your museum small, with just a few people wearing many hats? You'll need to figure out how best to overcome whatever shortcomings your team

has identified. Remember that creative use of existing staff can radicalize, and energize, your team.

In either case, your manager or executive should be responsive to your team having clearly assessed its task with regard to available talent and ability to handle the project. Although you'll often have to soldier on with the team as originally specified, you can take heart in knowing that it's easier to plunge into a project when you know your team's strengths and weaknesses in advance.

The second T: Tools
Tools are the people or things your team needs—besides the team itself—to complete your project. Whether considering people-tools, like subject-matter specialists, designers or editors, or off-the-shelf tools, like computer software, the possibilities are many. Will you need the help of internal graphic design staff? Might you have to outsource special assistance from an external consultant or contractor?

Early on, take stock of assets and deficits
What tools does your team need to get the job done? Realistic assessments, early in the game, beget realistic budgets and schedules, and minimize hassles down the road. Teams often get stuck when faced with a hurdle that's insurmountable using just the tools at hand. Getting over that hurdle so the project can move forward may require nothing more than a simple tool or resource. But if you haven't anticipated the need for such a resource, perhaps neither your budget nor your schedule will support it, and your project will stay stuck until someone works out a reasonable solution—and by then you may have a few scheduling headaches.

So make it a habit as soon as your project leaves the starting gate to evaluate the tools you need and the ones you already have. Ask yourselves whether you have the technological applications and human resources to get the job done. A caveat: Be realistic about the tools your team itself brings to the table, and be careful not to overestimate your own capacity. Every team we've ever been a part of has brought in people from outside the team or outside the organization for specialized help, or just to have enough hands to get all the work done on time.

Do your best to figure out the gaps in your "toolbox" so you can plan for and cover the costs of whatever support you need, from data analysis courtesy of your in-house IT people to the hiring of three carpenters six months down the road to build display cases. The last thing you want to hear is that the IT people are booked until December when you need that data analysis in August, or that the carpentry shop has scheduled its best carpenters for another job, but expects to have a couple of apprentices available when you need them… maybe.

The third T: Talk
Team members must make time, and take time, to talk to each other face-to-face. There's no substitute for the give-and-take of good old-fashioned conversation. It's key to the team-building process, especially (and ironically) in this so-called age of information. Thanks to voicemail, email, instant messaging and text messaging, not to mention poking one another and writing on walls in Facebook, we've become very good at exchanging information. But our expertise in communicating via technology has come at the expense of

communicating in person, in the actual presence of one another.

Instead of *Facebook*, think face time
The exchange of important ideas is no longer an exclusively face-to-face exercise. Instead, it has become an enterprise that is: more remote, as we meet less around the conference table and more often in conference calls; nearly inclusive, as we send and forward copies of emails to anyone and everyone in our address books; and practically invasive, as real-time technologically-enabled work-related "conversations" via email and voicemail take place throughout the day, over weekends, during vacations, and long after everyone has gone home from work.

For teams, "talking" must mean just that: talking! You and the members of your team must make time to get together in small groups and as a team to exchange information and just to chat. Have coffee. Have lunch. Take a walk. Meet at the water cooler. Plan an outing to a baseball game. Find out what people are thinking! The exercise of actually talking to one another will help to build a stronger team because real human contact is a simple but effective way to reinforce our enthusiasm for the job. Get to know the members of your team by talking with them up close and in person.

The fourth T: Time
The saying has become a cliché, but it's oh-so-true: Time, indeed, is money. And an inefficient, ineffective team, with its thoughtless, careless approach to work, sabotages the budget and the schedule, and shows a lack of respect for one another, the organization, and the audience. With today's competition for audiences (not to mention

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Are you bold enough to be old-school? Technology lets us work at arm's length—and farther—these days, but nothing beats getting together and hammering out an issue face to face. Photo by Yasmin Dalal for Chicago History Museum/2007

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competition for jobs) and an uncertain economy, who can afford to behave irresponsibly? Who is willing to act without integrity?

Honor the schedule

The team as a whole must stick to the schedule. Everyone associated with the project must understand and respect the amount of time allotted to each part of the job. And all concerned must agree that, aside from extenuating circumstances, each team member will make every effort to complete his or her part of the project on time. Period.

One way to stay on top of things is to make sure that managers clearly define the time constraints of the project from the very start. If the timeframe isn't clear, the team should request that the schedule be better defined. Few competent managers will refuse a direct and respectful request by a team for clarification on when the deliverables are due.

Faced with time troubles, summon gumption and imagination

For your team, maybe the issue isn't access to information; instead, it's the allocation of time. Perhaps your manager has decided that two weeks is enough for the exhibit-development phase, but the team feels that six weeks is more realistic. Address such issues at the beginning of a project, or don't bother complaining about them later. One

of the ugliest imaginable confrontations occurs when a team approaches a manager deep into a project timeline to announce that the scope of project work and the list of deliverables are a poor match for the existing schedule. Don't go there. Deal with scheduling concerns early in the game.

Although we don't know of anyone who's figured out a way to make schedule glitches and disputes completely disappear, teams can sometimes alleviate time problems by inventing their own project management process. Step away from the old linear model! Following basic project management protocols, you can organize, identify, isolate, label, and execute tasks and workloads as they arise. Create an opportunistic timeline that maximizes momentum wherever and whenever momentum occurs.

The fifth T: Trade

Okay, let's see. You're on a project team. The team meets once a week, up close and in person, around a big round conference table. You detour to each other's cubes just to say hi, and meet once in a while at break time, in pairs, or maybe in threes or fours, for coffee. From the outset, the team knew it would need to hire an outside exhibit designer, and she's just signed her contract. The team and your manager have hammered out a schedule everyone can live with. So far, life is good.

But now you're in the thick of it. The designer has turned in her first set of drawings, and they specify carpet-covered

plywood for the bases of your display cases. You, the developer, have set your sights on French-polished walnut. Now what? Do you demand? Whine? All but stamp your foot to get your way? Unfortunately, yes… some of us do.

Let cooperation be the foundation of your collaboration

Stop it! Stop right now. Team players don't demand. They negotiate. They cooperate. They collaborate. They give and take. Teams are all about… well, teamwork. Remember: We work in teams instead of working solo and unveiling—voila—a finished project. Why? First, one person usually has neither the skills nor the time to complete a project alone; second, like a healthy ecosystem, a team-driven effort resonates with many voices in a unified whole, giving it an energy that projects conceives in isolation will surely lack. Which product does your audience deserve?

So: When push comes to shove (and with any team, sooner or later, it surely will) be willing to explain, be willing to listen, be open, be kind, be willing to compromise, be willing to laugh at yourself—and be willing to let go. Get along, find the lessons in your mistakes and make it your business to make win-win trades. Trade everything you can--information, ideas, compliments, support, recipes—and keep in mind that everyone on your team is working, in his or her own way, toward a common goal.

Ready to put a little zing in your daily grind?

Ideas are fine and dandy, but there's no substitute for action. So jump right in and put the five Ts to the test with this team-building exercise. Participants had a blast with it at the NAME workshop this year, and we know it can work for you.

No, this isn't the newest exhibit development team on the block—but maybe it should be. Kids in groups are usually pretty quick to sort out jobs and get things done. Spats happen, but pass fast. There's a lot to be said for approaching teamwork with childlike enthusiasm.
Photo by Museum Explorer Inc./2007

The time frame: A couple of hours.
The end product: A quick model of your team's exhibit.
The point: Fostering collaborative spirit.
What to do:

1. Round up your team.

2. Gather a bunch of fun, cheap art materials— construction paper, pipe cleaners, craft sticks, feathers, foamcore, markers, buttons, sequins, a glue gun, the works.

3. Settle into a room where you won't be disturbed, and where your laughs and shrieks won't startle visitors or coworkers.

4. Distribute hats that assign team members unfamiliar roles. (We use paper crowns of different colors and shapes.) An educator might wear the marketing manager's hat; a designer can wear the curator hat.

5. Within a specific "project schedule" (we suggest two hours), role-play through the steps of the exhibit planning process, from development to design. Then create a model of your exhibit, or some small part of it. As you go along, practice the five Ts. Take your roles seriously. Communicate! Just don't spend so much time in the planning phase that you run out of time to build.

6. Does your model look like it came from

another planet? Never fear: It's the process that's important. No matter what your end product looks like, it's bound to be a great icebreaker. And it'll provide a great springboard for further discussion about your project.

Teamwork offers a way to rekindle passion for our work by opening doors that allow us (or force us) to really get to know the people we work with. It provides a forum for the spirited exchange of information. For most people, it's personally gratifying to be part of a group that works together, pooling time, talent, and energy toward a common goal. What's more, the activity surrounding a team project can lead to serendipitous outcomes, creating a model of cooperation with applications, and benefits, far beyond a strictly museum-based endeavor. ☀

It won't win any awards for design excellence, but this model helped its creators identify important issues in their exhibit planning process.
Photo by Museum Explorer Inc. 2007.