A Museum Disconnect: Program and Board Development

by John Durel

A decade ago a major museum in the Midwest underwent a dramatic change in the way it developed its exhibits and public programs. Seeking to bring new voices and diverse perspectives to its offerings, it reached out to its community through collaborative projects, roundtable discussions, focus groups, and the like. The staff became adept at listening to and working with constituents. Outside participation became the norm for program development. New exhibits attracted new audiences from parts of the community that had been neglected in the past.

This sort of approach became common in museums during the 1990's. The profession, through its associations and funders, has encouraged museum staff to reach out to under-served constituents and to become attuned to their needs and expectations. The result is that American museums are more connected to their communities, serving a greater diversity of people, than at any time in the past.

Still, most museum governing boards look much the same as they did ten or twenty years ago. Not only do they remain overwhelmingly white, they continue to see themselves and their roles in traditional terms. They may accept that a museum should serve minority audiences, but such activities are secondary to the museum's primary purposes. They see such outreach as something the museum does for the community, rather than as a means to transform the museum.

In the case of the Midwestern museum, while the staff changed, the board did not. As the leaders of the change departed, the museum drifted back to more traditional programs and exhibits. The staff leadership had only effected a change in the way programs were developed. However, they failed to change the culture of the organization. Unless a desired change infiltrates the entire organization from top to bottom, powerful auto-pilots will bring the organization back to its original course.

Most museums view program development and board development as distinct activities. Program development is a staff function, and the staff often is wary of too much board involvement. Sometimes there is a fear that board members will impose their pet projects on the staff. On the other hand, board development is a board prerogative. Board members already know the movers and shakers, and see no need for input from the staff, except perhaps the director. Thus, any improvement in program development has minimal and only indirect impact on board development, and vice versa.

To successfully transform a museum, so that it truly serves its diverse constituencies, the entire museum must change. This means that the processes of program development and board development should be consciously linked. There should be an overlap in people (board and staff) involved in each. The museum should ask what kinds of programs and exhibits will engage certain prospective trustees, and what potential trustees are likely to be attracted by certain programs. Neither process need determine the results of the other, but each should influence the other in order to create synergy between them.

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Here are some steps to create an explicit linkage between program development and board development:

1. Establish two teams, one for each process. Identify a few key trustees and staff members to serve on both teams.
2. Establish two-way communication between the teams, so that each is aware of the purpose, goals, and activities of the other.
3. Make successful board development a goal of program development. For a given exhibit or program, determine the target audience. Ask who are the leaders of that audience. As the project proceeds, see who emerge as leaders from the target community. Engage the leaders in getting to know the entire museum, not just the particular project. Cultivate these leaders as potential board members.
4. Make successful program development a goal of board development. Interview prospective board members, asking them what value they see the museum holds for the community, whom else the museums should serve, and how they could help in reaching those constituents.