

## Learning to Lead

Mike Spock



As my role shifted from manager to leader—the keeper of the flame—I could see that the tools we needed to run a more coherent but still non-hierarchical organization had to be found or invented. If all of us could let go of the reins.

My life was changing too. I found that I actually didn't mind not being key to every detail of the museum's plans and operations.

My fantasy was that if I gave away the power of managing the museum there would not be very much left for me to do. In fact there was plenty for me to do just paying attention to my job as the museum's leader. And as I had suspected, it turned out I wasn't much good as a day-to-day manager anyway.

Although I eventually got better at the few things I could not give away, my colleagues at the divisional and departmental levels were much better at managing than I was.

The story I told in the first chapter of *Boston Stories* about how I spent the first day as director turned out to set the pattern of my management style during the first third of my leadership of The Children’s Museum in the 1960s.

Although I made a pretty convincing case to the search committee of what I might do if I got to run the circus (they gave me the job), I hadn’t a clue about where to begin.

Up to that moment, my museum and work experiences were all project-based. Give me a project and I could figure out how to get it done. And I really loved doing things that way. Whether it was making a desk in Ted Bolle’s wood shop, or designing and building a temporary performance stage for a summer concert series, or researching and installing an exhibit on human reproduction in

the Dayton Museum of Natural History, or hanging Judy’s two art shows, or renovating the Antioch

Biology Department’s classrooms, labs, and offices, or doing the visitor research study as a graduate student at the American Museum of Natural History, I was never happier. These projects had clear beginnings and endings. And beyond sharing my vision with a boss, or teacher, or colleague, and getting advice when I got stuck, I usually managed to work pretty much by myself.

But then I was the boss, now what? I had never managed a project team much less a whole organization. I never had to describe the steps of a process to others. I never had to lay out who would be responsible for what tasks. I had never had to detail a budget and schedule.

When I started The Children’s Museum’s first exhibit, *What’s Inside?*, I took it on as my own. At least I knew what to do first. But since I—or the museum, or the profession—had almost no experience with creating interactive exhibits, I was unable to describe how it would look or work or whether it would hold up. Even in this personal assignment I was flying blind.

A young, inexperienced artist, Wilma Beraducci, was willing to help me with the things I knew I couldn’t do (draw); nevertheless I was unable to describe or point to examples of similar experiences (there were none) that would help Wilma understand what my words were trying to convey.

In fact, my biggest failing as an untrained director was that I couldn’t really conceptualize what my goals were, especially in enough detail so I could successfully describe to my collaborators how we would all get there.

Thus, in the 1960s I started a string of exhibit, program, and administrative initiatives. We made things happen. They were not so much a part of a grand design for turning The Children’s Museum in radical new directions. Instead they were openings that offered themselves to us, and if we had the wit to recognize them, opportunities to push us forward. This opportunistic approach made it possible, in spite of our relative poverty and inexperience, to get a lot of interesting things done.

So in the beginning you will find me telling stories that reflected this largely intuitive leadership that governed our initial thinking and work while I struggled to learn a useful approach to my leadership role. This initial intuitive phase was exciting and productive, but you will also see that it was essentially an unsustainable strategy for the long haul.

The first quarter of this chapter (Part I - Intuitive Leadership) tells stories of the opportunities that were presented to us in the ‘60s and what we seized on and turned to our will. These are the stories that tell of the multilayered organizational complexities involved in creating what everyone saw—the exhibits, programs, and materials, for kids, families, teachers, communities described in other chapters by other storytellers in *Boston Stories*.

What happened behind the scenes, away from the public spaces that began to draw all the attention and that eventually made us famous, is equally interesting and instructive. How The Children’s Museum evolved in the way it did is critical to understanding why and how the exciting things, activities, and memories made the museum a place to go to, learn from, and take those experiences back home.

But for all the excitement and accomplishments, The Children’s Museum in the ‘60s was an unsustainable enterprise. Unless the problems were identified and a cure found, the museum was in danger of dying or becoming beside the point. The second quarter of the Learning to Lead Chapter (Part II – The Director’s Project) tells the story of how these problems were diagnosed, a cure prescribed, and the organization brought back to life.

The third quarter of the chapter (Part III – Distributed Leadership) tells stories of how the turnaround demanded the invention of new tools needed to run a well-managed museum without compromising the values that we agreed were necessary for building and sustaining a viable organizational culture.

Finally, the last chapter quarter (Part IV – Values Tying the Threads Together) shows where the reader can discover, among *Boston Stories’* entire collection of case studies, how each story illustrates how these cultural values were challenged and maintained (or not) throughout the storyteller’s and The Children’s Museum experiences.



INTRODUCTION

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# Learning to Lead

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As wonderful things were accomplished and the museum was transformed, troubling problems began to appear. The expanding staff grew with soft money. Grants came to an end and were not reliably renewed or replaced. Rather than laying people off, ill-defined, un-funded jobs were created without clear goals, standards, or structure. Cut loose from the discipline of goals, standards, and structure, not-fully-engaged creative staff was apt to wander about kibitzing and criticizing. The combination was corrosive. Ostensibly happy staff were not. Everyone was crying for clarity and direction.

—Mike Spock

Part I  
1960s

INTUITIVE LEADERSHIP:  
Collection of Behind-the-Scenes Projects

So, with only a little encouragement and sometimes no obvious qualifications, a collection of doers and thinkers showed up and got to work. Things took shape and either failed or made it from a combination of inspiration and trial and error. We kept leashes long. People were encouraged to take chances and make things happen. Criticism was allowed. Proposals were written and grants were brought in. Nifty exhibits were created and multimedia educational materials and activities were tested and produced. Teachers and parents were trained and mentored. Collections were rationalized and documented. A little-used auditorium was eventually transformed into an open, multilevel visitor/exhibit facility. The old-fashioned, glass-enclosed natural history and cultural exhibits were retired, and our mansion was converted into a teacher resource center and offices for the burgeoning staff. Over seven years the budget increased more than fourfold, and the staff grew from seventeen to the full-time equivalent of thirty-five.

We got national attention and some significant government and foundation grants—highly unusual in those times. Out-of-state visitors with gleams in their eyes began to show up at our doorstep with dreams of creating similar experiences in their own communities. From the outside, The Children’s Museum in Boston looked like a success: the model of a progressive and thriving educational organization. But it was not.

The museum, as an organization, seemed to be in sort of a mess.

It wasn’t that we weren’t trying and adding innovative improvements. It sometimes seemed that we were investing as much time in getting the organization to work as we were in the museum programs. We figured out what needed our attention and with some creativity, found or created interesting and useful solutions. Some made us proud! So, perhaps the messiness was not about the systems but about other less obvious problems hiding in the organizational underbrush.

With all the exciting exhibits, programs, and projects during those first years, it wasn’t as if we weren’t

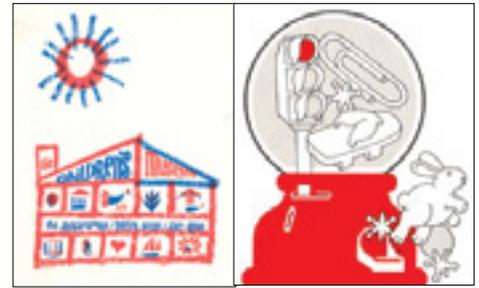
being creative on the management side of the equation as well. We planned a lot, were aggressive in looking for new sources of income and wrote interesting proposals. We put systems in place to take care of staff and collections, track finances, report progress and detect problems. We were usually at the head of the line in exploiting changes in the law, new technologies, and opportunities for collaborating. We were honest when things didn’t work and always tinkering with better ways of organizing things. But for all that good work, things came unglued organizationally by the sixth and seventh years. This early part of the leadership chapter catalogs some of the behind-the-scenes and largely invisible stories that matched the more obvious evidence that was visible to both public and professional visitors that the museum was changing in big ways!

## A New Logo (1963)

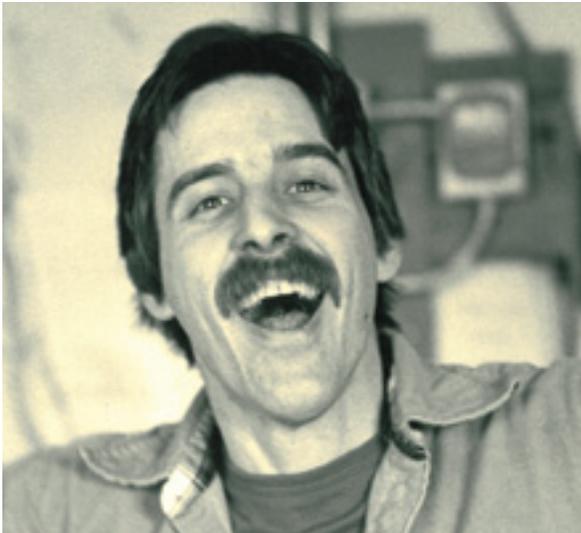
Stimulated by all the product and graphic designers showing off their stuff in the modern postwar environment, everyone wanted a logo for their organization to announce that they were current and with it. As a regular browser of the Museum of Modern Art’s design galleries and world’s fair pavilions, I couldn’t wait for World War II to be over and see what new “modern” products and buildings were waiting to be revealed. I remember my profound disappointment when the brand new five and ten in Rochester looked exactly like a 1920s Woolworths store from the post World War I era. I assumed that everything in this new progressive era would be modern. Didn’t Woolworths know any better?

So of course, when I became the new director of The Children’s Museum I couldn’t think of not replacing our charming but very old-fashioned 1930s letterhead. Eric Von Schmidt, an illustrator and musician who lived in Cambridge, brought in a portfolio that looked promising. In no time we had a wonderfully appropriate design that would work in a variety of colors and settings and that for this first time felt just like us.

We were comfortable with the logo for the next fifteen years until the move to the Wharf when Andy Merriell worked out a new logo that lent itself, in his creative hands, to various antic versions on T-shirts that celebrated the museum’s new look, softball team (“We



Logo evolution: left, 1930s logo, showing the museum's Jamaica Plain address; middle, Eric Von Schmidt's late 1960s' version that "felt like us" for fifteen years; right, Andy Merriell's subsequent design captured the energy of the move to the Wharf.



Staff member/illustrator/designer Andy Merriell.

Came to Play!"), and marked milestones in the museum's fortunes (the museum's rabbit drowning in the museum's gum ball machine when we all felt overwhelmed.) Andy's new logo also felt like us—the *new* us!

### Paid Admissions & Free Friday Nights (1963)

I soon figured out that, like an orchid, The Children's Museum was living on air. There was no predictable source of solid income beyond a tiny endowment. The Godfrey M. Hyams Trust made a habit of contributing generously each year to our operating budget. They had set the stage in 1935 when Hyams' two sisters, Sarah and Isabel, underwrote the move to our new home by purchasing the Mitton Mansion on the Jamaica way and constructing the auditorium that became the Visitor Center in 1968.

Each year the volunteer Museum Aid group held a holiday bazaar for which they crafted handmade gifts and invited specialty shops to offer tables of their goods giving a percentage of sales to Museum Aid. At the end of each year, the board of trustees made up the difference to bring the museum's budget back into balance. In Boston, there was no operating subsidy from the city or regional or state governments as there was in other metropolitan areas.

Having grown up in New York, where most of the big museums were free, I could just walk in—even just to use the restrooms—and walk out. There was a modest admission at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). I loved MoMA's special exhibitions like *Indian Art of the United States* (1941) where I could watch native artists at work, and *Airways to Peace* (1943) where interactive exhibit modules helped me figure out how maps were designed for alternative uses and alternate trips. And of course the silent movies in the basement, accompanied by a live piano, were all appealing. Rockefeller Center's Museum of Science, among the museums I really loved, also charged admission.

Although I resisted the change, we had to begin charging admission at The Children's Museum. We softened the blow with a tent card on the admission desk: "If the charge is a problem, let us know and we will arrange to sponsor your admission." It was \$1.00. The staff was coached to be aware of visitors hesitating at the door, to open the conversation, and to always let them in. We were also active in getting Boston city branch libraries to loan out membership cards for free admission to the museum.

We began extending the Friday evening hours to 9:00 p.m., advertising them as "Free Friday Nights." Both changes were timed to the opening of *What's Inside?* We offered modest Friday evening theater programs, for which we charged, giving all the proceeds to the performers. In one very tough year, we had to charge \$1.00 for the formerly free Friday Nights, but were able to hold for many years before corporations began to sponsor what became Friday Family Nights. It took years for the word to get out that Friday Family Nights were a bargain! But once it did, Friday Family Nights became really busy, and the demographics were much more diverse—which made us feel a touch less guilty.

When the new MATCH Kits were ready to go to the schools—and if teachers were not trying out the prototype units in their classrooms—we started to charge for the kit rentals to cover the department's operating expenses. We offered to send them by UPS if teachers couldn't arrange for pickups and returns. The museum store began to make a little money, and we got very good at writing and selling grants to foundations and government agencies. In fact, we think we were the first

non-federal museum to receive a program grant from a federal agency.

But getting the budget to balance each year continued to be a struggle. We were always looking for the next opportunity to exploit a new source of funding or savings. For each opportunity we uncovered and mined, the upward income curve, however promising initially, would always flatten out leaving us to find yet another source. The demand was insatiable. Unlike capital-intensive industries (media, manufacturing, transportation) where technological improvements tended to keep inflation in check, we were riding the same curve as other labor-intensive organizations (schools, hospitals, orchestras) where the curve always exceeded the rate of inflation. After intense rounds of aggressive management savings, museums like ours could not count on continued efficiencies and scaling. Making the budget fit each year was exhausting.

When the holiday bazaar began to run out of steam, at my urging, the Community Services department and Museum Aid shamelessly copied The Children's Museum of Indianapolis's Haunted House as our next seasonal fundraiser. After the move to the Wharf, we co-sponsored the Big Apple Circus when they began to venture beyond New York City.

But the museum's bread and butter became earned income driven by growing attendance and admission fees, which in turn drove shop sales and membership income. Like most science museums today, (yes, we took our clue from them and zoos—not art or history museums—unless they were government-owned or on park land and therefore, subsidized) the percentage of earned income to unearned was about three quarters of our budget.

### **TIAA Retirement Plan (1965)**

When I got to the museum, senior staff members (Phyllis O'Connell, assistant director and acting director when I arrived; Miriam Dickey, director of education; and Ruth Green, director of loans and collections) had all been there for more than a decade and each made only \$5,000 a year. Even in the 1960s, this was roughly half what they could command in a comparable public school job. I made some hay by pointing out that there was only one board member who was annually contributing more than Phyl, Miriam, and Ruth to the finances of the museum. In fact, all three women were still living with members of their families in the houses they grew up in, which made it possible for them to survive on our inadequate salaries. As if that weren't bad enough, each was well into her fifties and there was no provision for their retirement. When it came time, the implicit assumption was that the board would vote a contribution each year during their retirement, although there was no guarantee that the funds would be in place or the board would remember to actually make it happen.

Board member John Spring had grown uncomfortable about this uncertain arrangement and offered to work on getting a formal retirement plan in place. At our first meeting John, who had served on the boards of several independent schools, suggested that we look into TIAA (the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association begun by Andrew Carnegie in 1918 as a way to support the financial well-being of college teachers) as an affordable retirement vehicle. It turned out that there was no precedent to support our application for membership in TIAA since we were not an academic institution.

We scrutinized TIAA's guidelines more carefully. What were the criteria for being considered a school, college or university? You had to offer regularly scheduled courses. Well, we had teacher workshops, after-school clubs, and a summer day camp. Over the phone, the sympathetic TIAA representative suggested we put together an application emphasizing these features. And damned if we weren't accepted! As far as we know, we were the first museum not directly affiliated with a college or university that made the grade. All of us who are now in our dotage are feeling tremendously grateful to have been swept up in Andrew Carnegie's generous embrace and John Spring's extraordinarily insightful opportunism.

Of course we had to decide exactly what our retirement policy would look like, just how generous the museum would be, whether our matching contributions would be voluntary or not, and how we would compensate for the time already served by the three senior members of the staff, and so on.

Employees initially resisted coming up with a matching contribution when they were forced to join the plan (by the anniversary of the first year of employment and reaching their thirtieth birthday, membership would be mandatory). We finessed the issue by making sure that when each of us joined the plan, a salary increase was timed to cover the added cost of the employee's match without suffering any loss in actual take-home pay.

Among all the things I am proudest of was how John Spring, the board, and I found a way to put the museum's humane retirement plan in place.

### **College Work-Study Program (1965)**

Another example of timely opportunism occurred when word got out that as part of Lyndon B. Johnson's New Society legislation, it would be possible to pay college students for part-time work to supplement the cost of their tuition and fees. Although the new federal College Work Study Program (CWS) was originally designed to cover on-campus student jobs, we hoped it might cover most of the costs of museum floor staff or "interpreters" who facilitated the learning of visiting families and school groups as they interacted with our newer generation of hands-on exhibits.



Suzanne LeBlanc, left, came to The Children's Museum as a fulltime paid intern (\$25/week) assisting Elaine Heumann Gurian. Later, she created the museum's Kids at Risk program and eventually went on to a career that included directing two other children's museums. Natalie Faldasz (wife of Ted, head of maintenance and resident caretakers) was in charge of the College Work Study Program and Suzanne's colleague in the Visitor Center.

When I began working at the museum, all staff had to take turns covering the floor and the clubs, especially during weekends and school vacations. Our growing attendance had put even more pressure on staff to cover their slots. The opportunity to hire college students at almost no cost seemed heaven-sent and not to be missed!

We made the rounds of area colleges and universities with a simple job description and a commitment to

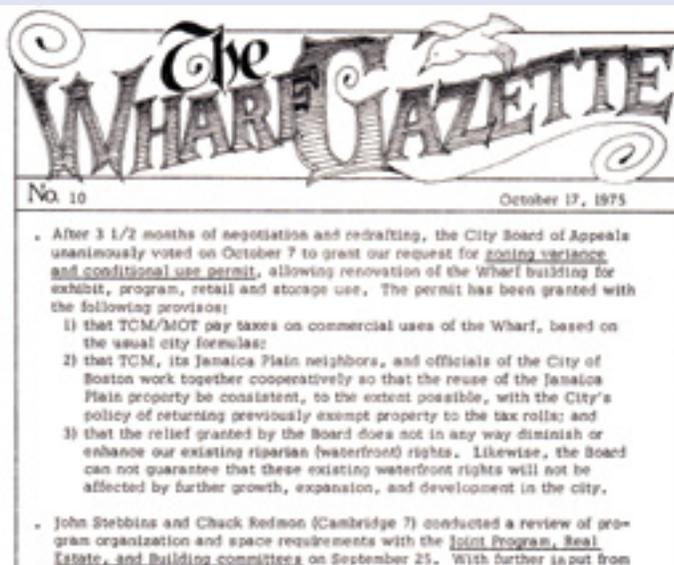
train and supervise the students and cover the payroll contribution for which the college was to be responsible. With the program so new, the colleges had only begun to explore the potential for on-campus jobs, so campus administrators welcomed the jobs the museum offered. Before we knew it, we had several dozen Work Study students working at the museum fifteen hours/week during the school year and thirty-five hours/week during the summer—at almost at no cost to us! (Ninety percent of their salaries was paid by the federal government, 10 percent by the museum.) At its peak there were forty CWS staff members paid the equivalent of a hefty six-figure operating subsidy each year from this government program.

Less than ten years later, funding cuts began and a much canner team of college faculty and administrators were up to speed on making sure all CWS jobs were absorbed on campus. But during that golden decade, with a lot of careful work with individual program administrators the museum benefited from a huge infusion of time from an eager team of young staff working on the museum floor, behind the scenes, and in community centers. Many of these students, trained at the museum, ended up in the profession; some became directors of their own museums. When the CWS program began to dry up, we had to scramble to find other ways to subsidize this crew because by then we had become terribly dependent on students to make the visitors' experience truly memorable.

### The Collections Project (1966-1981)

The Children's Museum was a real museum with real collections. Our guess was that the artifact collection numbered about 30,000 objects. The natural history

## Meetings & Staff Notes (1966-1970)



In some ways, each of us only had a fragmentary understanding of what was going on throughout the museum, and especially of all the things that might actually affect or interest us. In service of communication, as a supplement to the sprawling staff meeting, and what is now called "transparency," we began to publish "Staff Notes." Printed in Ozalid purple (we couldn't afford one of the new Xerox copiers) it telegraphed weekly news developments until the reorganization during the Director Project only to reappear as the "Wharf Gazette." Those early "Staff Notes" and the later "Wharf Gazettes" have been mined by the *Boston Stories* team to understand some of the history of the museum in the '60s and '70s. The "Wharf Gazette" masthead was one of Andy Merriell's great designs.

specimens were inherited from the old Museum of Natural History when we moved from Copley Square to Jamaica Plain in 1913 becoming The Children's Museum instead of the Science Teacher's Service. But most of the collections were cultural artifacts—usually souvenirs from vacations to “exotic places”—salvaged from people's attics and, because they had little value, donated to the museum. Ethnographers scornfully classified most of those odd assorted materials as “tourist trade.” Some old objects, also from basements and summer cottages and not exotics, we classified as “Americana.” All these objects, from a stuffed grouse, to a wire rug beater, to a Japanese Friendship Doll, were catalogued and inventoried with library cards and entered into permanent accession record journals.

These rich collections got lots of play over the years in classroom loan exhibits, in conventional glass-cased exhibits, as fun things to be discovered in Paper and Pencil Games on the museum floor, as “handling materials” passed from child to child among visiting school groups, and as study materials for afterschool clubs and the summer day camp, July Jaunters.

Still, for all their richness, the collections didn't have much focus, and there were no formal criteria about what would be accepted into them. Ruth Green simply decided if each donation had merit—or not. She had a good eye and memory and a practical idea of what might be useful in the museum's exhibits and programs. In addition to creating and maintaining classroom and museum exhibits, Ruth also was a real teacher of children and over the years developed games and kits, and led classes, clubs, and summer programs.

Among this sprawling accumulation of items, interesting objects were often misidentified. Parts of sets might have different accession numbers. Some things were in bad shape and probably should have been actively conserved or just withdrawn. Some objects had real value, or were irreplaceable, and should not continue to be handled or circulated in the loan boxes. Some things had special value to members of a particular culture and should not be displayed to the public or even be considered for repatriation in the community of origin.

The collection needed work.

We also realized that we were up against the boundaries of the definition of a children's museum. What was a teaching collection? Should objects be allowed to be used up? What was the definition of “real value?” Could a cultural artifact be identified simply as a generic “Indian Bow,” or did it deserve a more specific and accurate cultural designation such as a “Ceremonial Apache Bow?” Should the collection be subject to periodic inventory?

Example of things that brought these questions into relief were the following:

- A set of woven Netsilik Eskimo bags purchased in Pely Bay for the Eskimo Seal Hunting MATCH Kits to hold activity game pieces. The bags later had to be

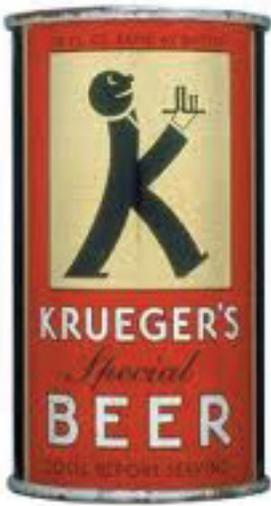


Harold Hall and Bobby Walker carry one of several mounted mooseheads from the paneled walls of the museum library's former Mammal Room to the Annex in the '60s to make room for the Workshop of Things. Walker went on to become a furniture conservator at the Museum of Fine Arts.

reclassified from the Teaching Collection to the Reserve Collection when the last women who made them died and no one was left to pass on the weaving technique. We reluctantly withdrew the game bag, even though it was originally conceived as packaging—but terrific packaging—for the circulating kits.

- A significant collection of Maria Martinez pots from San Ildefonso Pueblo, including a series of pieces commissioned by the museum to illustrate how her black-on-black pottery was made. This part of the museum's Martinez collection is now valued at substantially more than six figures.

During this collections reorganization period, a charming young redheaded man showed up in Joan Lester's office and politely asked if he could see the Japanese collection. Soon after, our Japanese swords disappeared. Years later, this same man, Myles Connor, was identified on CNN's Court TV “...as a notorious art thief...and art connoisseur...” Convicted and serving time, Connor told the FBI that he knew the hiding place of the famous and still unsolved 1990 theft of \$500 million worth of paintings from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Obviously, Joan inadvertently took part in Myles' cultural caper.



Among collectors, the first flat-top beer cans produced in 1935 were the most valuable. Two were found in the walls of the museum's auditorium while it was being renovated into the Visitor Center in 1968.

I happened to read a magazine piece about the growing craze of beer-can collecting. The article identified the 1935 Kruegers Finest Beer as the first beer that had been packaged in innovative "flattop cans." Our vintage can might be extraordinarily valuable. I let out a whoop and ran to Ruth's office to share the news of our good fortune. Ruth was crestfallen and extraordinarily contrite. She had tossed out the cans!

The value of at least some of the collection may have been only in the eyes of the collector.

As we began taking our role as a "real" museum more seriously, Joan Lester and Phyl became deeply involved in thinking about the future of the collection and its supporting data. Joan, Phyl, Ruth, and I had several meetings about collection goals and what our approach should be to make it more useful.

Possible space to assess and work on the collection had been claimed for offices in a recent staff expansion. So one early decision was to find temporary working space nearby during what became known as the Collections Project. We rented one floor of an old Jamaica Plain shoe factory. Concentrating on one part of the collection at a time, Joan and an intern, Ed Grusheski, would spread out a subset of objects, such as Woodland Indians artifacts, on acres of plywood atop sawhorses, and match each one with its corresponding accession record and collection catalog card. Joan hired a series of experts (in this case, Fred Dockstader of the Museum of the American Indian) to identify each object, its origins and era, and correct any mistakes in the records. Borrowing nomenclature from a system originally designed for searching articles in anthropology journals, we added

During the 1968 renovation of the auditorium in the Visitor Center I discovered two empty Krueger beer cans nestled among the studs, left behind by workmen during their lunch break during the original 1935 construction. The cans were in mint condition and sported an art moderne logo of a striding bellhop in the form of a sans serif letter "K" carrying a tray of drinks. As a kid, this clever brand had made a big impression on me. Bringing the cans to Ruth Green, I breathlessly told the story of my find, of my vivid childhood memory, and suggested that we add the can to the collection of Children's Museum memorabilia. Several years later

letter prefixes to each catalog number that identified the culture of that object. We also designated everyday contemporary and historic western material (tools, toys, dolls, costumes) as coming from an "Americana culture."

In anticipation of the arrival of computers for managing museum collections, we decided to think through possible digital-friendly systems, even if in the mid-'60s they seemed impossibly expensive and very far into the distant future. If we couldn't exactly see into the future, it seemed prudent to not spend a lot of time and cash investing in specific hardware and cataloging systems that might turn out to be dead ends. IBM punch cards turned out to be one technological dead end. The short stack of punch cards necessary to store each object's numbers, name, category, notes, home-base location for inventory tracking, and a half-frame mug shot (the cards had small windows that would hold film positives) were another interim solution, although when computer



Ruth Green, originally head of the loan department, exhibits, and collections, removes the dollhouse's glass front to maintain its occupants and their furnishings. Dollhouses were permanently displayed in traditional hands-off exhibits in the old JP museum.

memory later became really cheap, it was fairly easy to transfer the information and images on the IBM cards to more modern electronic databases. As always, we were skating the edge of current technology, and more than once got beyond the practical limits of what we could actually achieve using it—always much less than what we could conceive. In the 2010 strategic plan "Creating a Digital Smithsonian," the Smithsonian Institution referred to this timing issue that we were trying to address almost fifty years earlier:

"...Past efforts to digitize were often driven by sporadic opportunities or immediate program needs, resulting in 'random acts of digitization,' with items captured in various formats using different technologies.

...To avoid a digital Tower of Babel, we [the Smithsonian] will create a unified program, driven by a comprehensive strategy that offers guidelines

for what we do and do not digitize; clear policies and processes; and uniform standards” (Chapter 11, page 8).

It took four years for Joan, Ed, and others to finish sorting, organizing, correcting, and documenting all the stuff and data before we moved everything back to the museum.

In the meantime, we commissioned Duncan Smith to design an affordable structure for housing the collection. The system we settled on, and that is in use at the museum to this day, was a homemade arrangement using Texture 111 plywood (originally manufactured as a vertically grooved exterior siding,) supported by a simple two-by-three wooden frame, that creates the modular slides for hanging the vacuum-formed ABS trays (that first reached the market as indestructible, gorilla-proof luggage.) Not only did it become our affordable collection storage system but it was also the armature for the visible Study Storage component that became a feature of the exhibits *We’re Still Here* and the *Japanese House*, both of which turned out to be our only comprehensive program areas.

### Kids, Families, and Dogs (1960s-1970s)

Way before the “permissive” era of the ’60s and ’70s, neighborhood kids were tolerated behind the scenes in offices and workspaces. In fact, they were welcomed, but in turn were expected to help out with simple administrative and project work and not interrupt grown-ups’ trains of thought. Looking back on those times, former neighborhood kids and children of staff and board members, now fully-fledged adults, all report that those informal “apprenticeships” were critical to their becoming museum and other professionals.

We welcomed dogs behind the scenes as well—but not in collections. Some memorable museum dogs were Martha and Eunice who led Jim Zien, King who kept guard from under Karen Kessler’s reception desk, and Julio who was “loaned” by David and Fran Burnham to Phyl O’Connell.

Ted Faldasz, head of maintenance, and his family lived on the museum’s grounds serving as round-the-clock caretakers for the property. Faldasz kids David and Bryan helped out informally when Ted occasionally needed support. They weren’t paid. However, a policy issue arose when members of Ted’s family were invited to join the paid staff. It was a simple matter to include wife Natalie on the Visitor Center staff since she was hired by and reported to Elaine rather than to Ted. The rule was that you couldn’t report directly to a member of your own family. Beyond that there was no precedent in the museum’s policy manual, or for that matter in the American work place, for protecting the museum from organizational nepotism.

The policy developed for paying the Faldasz kids became the model for other staff families’ members

invited to join the paid staff. Two things made the difference: first, all jobs had to be widely posted beyond the museum to make sure we actively recruited the less obvious candidates who didn’t look exactly like us. And second, if we made exceptions, as we did with David and Bryan, and later Mike Fitzgerald’s kids when they became adolescents and could qualify for paid jobs, the exceptions had to make sense within the museum context. Such rules had to be seen as helpful to everyone—staff and managers alike—not straightjackets or as ways of protecting ourselves.

We took such management responsibilities seriously but flexibly. We became a fairly tightly managed organization, but we were still small enough to deal with most issues personally and on a case-by-case basis. However, in the postpartum unwinding of organizational coherence after the move to the Wharf, the museum staff was no longer a self-regulating community. We had to take time to acknowledge that growth-fed loss and work together to fix the problems and regain our trust with each other.

### Getting in Bed with Jim (1968)

We always were on the lookout for money to do the good things we wanted to do, or just for survival, but sometimes we had to hold our noses in the asking. How did we rationalize the strongly felt institutional and personal values with the sometimes unsavory folks we found ourselves going to bed with?

Jim Craven, our Jamaica Plain state representative, was a hands-on, second generation Irish pol. Jim showed up at the preview party for the brand new Visitor Center in the fall of ’68. Impressed by what he saw, Jim took me aside and said, *sotto voce*, that he would get us a line item in the state budget just like the Museum of Science. Boy, wouldn’t that be great! He brushed aside my offer of help and said he would get back to me.

Months passed with no word about the line item. Then the phone rang. It was Jim. There would be \$35,000 for the Children’s Museum in next year’s MDC (Metropolitan District Commission) budget! Wow! Terrific! How did it happen? Jim said he would come over with a copy of the legislation and tell us about how he got it through.

“Prorogation”—over the years I grew fond of that arcane word and concept—was the moment when legislators were extraordinarily focused on getting all the loose ends of their favorite projects wrapped up before the close of the session. Of course, anything left on the table—bills and budgets—would have to start from scratch with the next legislature.

When Jim Craven arrived looking pleased with himself, he presented me with a copy of the bill and told this tale: In the frantic, sleep-deprived moments of prorogation, with the house chamber clock actually stopped, Jim timed his moment to approach the Speaker and (I always imagined him whispering conspiratorially as he

always did with me) saying that he hoped that the leadership wouldn't forget The Children's Museum. He then eagerly reported their conversation that followed.

"What about The Children's Museum? I don't remember anything about The Children's Museum!"

"But you promised that you would put The Children's Museum in the MDC budget, like the Museum of Science."

"I did?"

"You did. Here's a draft of the bill. And here is the line where it goes in the budget. We're all counting on you!"

"OK, OK, OK!"

Jim went on: "And it passed! Of course I lied, I hadn't talked to the Speaker before then! I was waiting to slip it in when everyone was so busy with prorogation that the Speaker was unlikely to remember whether he had promised me or not!"

When I asked Jim the next year about an increase in our new line item, he said that the school busloads that were to be let in free had only just begun to come to the museum. He chided me, "You have to crawl before you learn to walk!"

But the year after that he came through with an increase to \$50,000.

As before, Jim phoned and said he was coming over. He arrived with a photographer and an elaborately illuminated and framed certificate that expressed our gratitude for James J. Craven, Jr.'s contributions to The Children's Museum. He wanted me to sign it, so he could hang one in his office and one in the museum,

and take a picture of the two of us and the certificate for the *Jamaica Plain Citizen*. I was pleased to accommodate him and more than a little embarrassed that he had to initiate this little ceremony of gratitude. Jim wasn't at all displeased. The important thing was that it got done and that the recognition—whatever the source—appeared!

### Harvard Community Health Plan (1970)

In the 1970s, the world of medicine began to think of ways to keep the cost of medical care within reason without just surrendering to the insurance industry or compromising the quality of care but still taking advantage of the advances in medical research. One of the most interesting directions came from academic medicine: medical schools and teaching hospitals, where most of the faculty were on salaries rather than working as independent entrepreneurs. One of these experiments was Boston's Harvard Community Health Plan, a pioneering health maintenance organization (HMO). As suggested by its name, it was a powerful player in the medical community. As we seemed to be aware of most new and progressive trends in society, we took notice of the arrival of Harvard Community Health and asked to be part of their experiment. In fact, staff member Mary Babine, in her *Boston Stories* interview, noted that we might have been the very first organization to become part of the new HMO: our personal membership cards bore numbers that were all under one hundred. Even when we were in our organizational infancy, the museum didn't miss many bets.

## Climate Surveys (1971 & 1973)

For all of the museum's very public successes, everyone—board, management, and staff—knew we were in trouble, but finding the way out was not obvious. Perhaps the most powerful and objective diagnostic instrument that we used with consultants from McBer and Company, Inc. were survey questionnaires that assessed the staff climate (work environment) of the museum.

The questionnaire consisted of thirty-three questions initially under the probing category of What the Climate Is to which staff could respond that they: 1) definitely disagree, 2) are inclined to disagree, 3) are inclined to agree, or 4) definitely agree. Sample questions included the following:

1. The assignments in this organization are clearly defined.
2. Our management isn't so concerned about formal organization and authority, but concentrates instead on getting the necessary people together to do the job.
3. In this organization we set very high standards for performance.

Next, staff was immediately asked to repeat the questionnaire, except questions probed a new category:

What the Climate Should Be. Sample questions included the following:

1. The assignments in this organization should be more clearly defined.
2. Our management should not be concerned about formal organization and authority, but should concentrate instead on getting the necessary people together to do the job.
3. In this organization we should set much higher standards for performance.

Both questionnaires were scored for each staff member on six dimensions—conformity, responsibility, standards, rewards, clarity, and team spirit—and displayed in a graph that showed what the perceived climate was versus what they thought it should be. The spread scored on each dimension demonstrated a significant disparity between the two.

This first survey was conducted in 1971 when McBer did the original museum climate assessment; it was repeated two years later to see what changes had occurred between the original assessment and the turnaround. By 1973, progress: the "actual" and "should be" chart lines were much more clearly aligned.

**Part II**  
**1970-1971**

**THE DIRECTOR'S PROJECT:**  
*Learning to Lead*

During the 1960s wonderful things were accomplished, but as the museum was transformed problems began to appear. The expanding staff grew with soft money. Grants came to an end and were not reliably renewed or replaced. Rather than laying people off, ill-defined, un-funded jobs were created without clear goals, standards, or structure. Cut loose from the discipline of effective goals, standards, and structure, not-fully-engaged creative staff were apt to wander about kibitzing and criticizing. The combination was corrosive. Ostensibly happy staff were not. Everyone was crying for clarity and direction.

We had always met around a long table at all-staff meetings. Everyone was invited to participate in important decisions. My Fieldston and Antioch training allowed me to take this approach as a matter of course: full participation led to informed decisions; collective decisions were democratic decisions. I also believed that creativity would thrive best in a non-hierarchical work environment. And the work we were doing was nothing if not creative.

As we moved ahead on our ambitious agendas, things began to come apart. We reorganized and redefined and reorganized again. Nothing seemed to stick. Beyond the traditional operating departments and budget that I inherited, there was no underlying structural armature to which to anchor a loose collection of project teams that formed and disbanded as needed.

Deficits had become the rule. We were invading the endowment at an alarming rate. Everyone—board, management, and staff—could see that if this continued the end would soon be in sight.

**Cries for Help**

I needed help. I went to Bob Lloyd, our president and a sympathetic corporate type, to discuss options. Following this meeting, Bob sent the following letter to the board:

Dear Executive Committee Member:

...I had a meeting with Mike. After working through a rough cut of the budget...Mike then turned to the development of the Long Range Plan...Then a bomb shell!

He asked me to sponsor him in a request to the board for a year's sabbatical. What he wants to do is to see if he can put together a grand scheme, or package, for the role of an institution such as ours in these changing times. He thinks that the only way we can do the things that he sees as necessary require the museum to become part of large group of institutions all doing their own

thing, but doing it with a combined purpose and aggressiveness that makes the total more meaningful. In the really broad interpretation, education from birth to grave...

Boy, what a tall order! Reinventing education, restructure the learning process, change the role of the small public/private institution...

Just maybe he could do it—against this I say it's just too big, too risky, too deep waters for us..."

In the meantime, Bob received a letter from three former and leading trustees who shared their doubts about the financial prospects of The Children's Museum under my leadership.

With the reluctant endorsement of Bob Lloyd and the museum's leadership it was agreed that I would turn over the management reins to Phyl O'Connell and take a half-year "sabbatical" to examine the museum, my role

**The Children's Museum:**

**An exciting place to be...**

**1963-1969**

**First Interactive Exhibit (*What's Inside?*)**  
**First Admission Charge**

**1964-1968**

**First Federal Grant (MATCH Project)**

**1965**

**First Retirement Plan (TIAA-CREF)**

**1966**

**First Collection Reorganization & Documentation (The Collections Project)**

**1966-1969**

**First Federal Research Grant (Validated Exhibit Project)**

**1967**

**First University Contracts (College Work Study Program)**

**1967-1979**

**First Teacher Center (Workshop of Things)**

**1968-1979**

**First Exhibit/Program Facility (Visitor Center)**



**...but with scary finances**

**1962-1971**

**Cumulative Deficit (\$ 427,173)**

## The Future Museum (1975)



In another McBer and Company museum climate assessment exercise, staff were asked to look several years into the future to describe the museum they hoped to see, focusing on: 1) what the museum would be in 1975, 2) what they would like it to be, 3) the strengths and resources available to help the museum become what they would like it to be, 4) major blocks or obstacles that might prevent that from happening, and 5) six actions or decisions that must be taken to become the organization they would like it to be. The section about major blocks or obstacles elicited the predictable mission, money, and board problems, but staff were quite consistent in their responses to two related and nested issue clusters: organizational leadership...

“Without a coherent, overriding institutional philosophy adopted by all concerned, we are lost as an effective force for change.”

“Unwillingness to make choices and focus energy.”

“Lack of decisiveness and priorities clearly set...”

“Lack of direction...Not enough accountability.”

“...no clear delegation of responsibility...no one knows with whom the final authority rests. Real doubt on the part of the staff that things can change.”

...and, museum leadership (me).

“Mike Spock’s inconsistencies...”

“Mike’s internal tugs toward both arbitrary authority and participatory democracy...”

“Lack of leadership/organizational clarity from Mike. I feel this personally and see it organizationally... he is a poor administrator...most of the frustration, searching, role obscurity and general fuzziness is generated mainly by Mike’s shortcomings, his combination of ambivalence and strong mindedness, his shyness... and his hang-ups about authority (his own and other people’s)...I don’t think we can even address the rest of the museum problems decently until Mike gets [it] together and we or he cleans up all the role fuzziness.”

in it, and its place in the community and the lives of children. I would return with a focus (we didn’t call it a mission in those days) and a rough plan for carrying it out. It was named the Director’s Project.

### The Director’s Project Begins

I found office space at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in an old Beacon Hill mansion overlooking Boston Common that ICA had borrowed from the city. I did a lot of reading and thinking. The collection of correspondences, memos, and reports (located in the Archives) give a pretty good idea of some of the dead ends I came up with in my hideout at the ICA that summer.

### The Cavalry Arrives

Acknowledging to myself that working on a grand analysis and prescriptions might not be the real answer for the museum, I thought that an organization consultant could help, even make the difference. We didn’t lack ideas, only the capacity for making them happen without going down in flames.

Bob Lloyd didn’t hold much truck for organizational development (too touchy and feely,) but I persisted and decided to go ahead anyway. After poking around for a while I found a small firm, McBer and Company, Inc., and thought they might work. McBer management consultants David Berlew and Steven Rhinesmith seemed low key, respectful of what I wanted to do, and refreshingly un-doctrinaire. We liked each other. By inclination and aware of our very limited budget they suggested a simple approach: they would do some preliminary diagnostic work and then we would design an intervention where they would serve as my coaches while relying on me and the museum staff to do the work of reforming the organization. There would be no written report or presentations—just thinking, talking, planning, and deciding.

David and Steve met with key staff and board, one at a time, to probe the organization’s issues and climate. Their initial guess was that they would have to dig to uncover everyone’s true feelings and work to free up communication across the museum, a pattern they had seen in other troubled organizations. Instead, they found that feelings were near the surface and freely expressed. The problem was actually me. I was sending mixed signals and keeping everyone thoroughly confused about my motives and their roles. So instead of making the intervention a museum-wide exercise, we decided to shift gears and concentrate instead on helping straighten me out!

The four of us (Phyl, David, Steve, and me) gathered in front of an easel and pad of newsprint for a half day every six weeks or so. We settled into a fairly regular routine: in the first third of the meeting I reported on the results of my homework assignment and what it

seemed to suggest; then we would discuss our options and reach decisions based on the insights uncovered in the homework; and finally, we would figure what to do next. Steve and Dave would teach us how to do the following round of homework before we met again.

But the first job was to figure out more specifically why my leadership was so problematic and how the staff was trying to deal with it and me. I was given a battery of psychological tests that probed my fundamental motives and approaches to organizations and life. The staff filled out an instrument that compared their perceptions of how an effective and caring organization should supervise and treat its staff against how the museum was actually doing it. The differences would be a measure of how far we were from the actual to the ideal and where the particular soft points on such issues as structure, communication, clarity, recognition, and rewards were. The specific issues would become the agenda for our reorganization and rebirth.

I had always thought of myself as a collaborative, democratic, open, laid back guy (although we didn't call it "laid back" in the '60s). Instead I was shocked to learn that I had very strong power drives and lots of specific ideas of where we might be headed and how things should be done to get there. Pretending to myself and everyone else that it was otherwise was terribly confusing, not to say anxiety-provoking, as people tried to figure out how to relate to me and how to get their work done. In my inexperience I frequently had only the faintest notions of goals and strategies, but I knew things weren't right when I saw them. I became famous for "Spocking" projects, giving almost no direction until things were very far along and then showing up and making gratuitous suggestions at the very last minute. I didn't realize until much later that I also couldn't put my dreams into words. It really was only in the process and then looking at the result that I realized what we were doing and where we were headed. It made me very attractive to follow but impossible to work for. And in my first troubled years, everyone worked directly for me, one way or another. There were departments and managers, but in the end everyone got their mandates, protection, and orders from me.

Going into my sabbatical, seven years into my administration, I really questioned whether I could go on directing The Children's Museum. Perhaps I was the classic entrepreneur who was great at getting things conceived and moving but had to step aside eventually for someone who would be a better manager. I felt we had built an exciting organization and hated to leave just as we were hitting our stride, even though I was causing so much pain and suffering. But perhaps it was the right thing to do. There would be other things for me to contribute, other organizations to invigorate. Maybe it was time to move on.

In one of our early sessions I posed this choice to David and Steve. Although they were quick to acknowl-

## What was McBer?



In his 2001 book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins describes the type of leader needed to turn a good company into a great one as someone who is "a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will."

McBer and Company, Inc. (now known as Hay/McBer) was founded in 1963 by psychologist and Harvard professor David McClelland (1917-1998). A McBer consultancy involved examining motivations and looking for core competencies in trying to help people achieve their full potential in both their personal or professional lives. McClelland is credited as a founder of the competency movement. Its principles and methodology have been widely applied in business, education, economics mental health, and global development.

In his 1973 paper "Testing for Competence rather than Intelligence," published in *American Psychologist*, McClelland argued that the typical exams and IQ tests were not accurate predictors of job performance. Instead, he focused on ways to identify other variables, known as "competencies." McClelland's "Three Need Theory" analyzed an individual's needs for achievement, affiliation, and power and how that balance could contribute to their motivation and effectiveness in a given role or job.

Former McClelland business partner and board member of The Children's Museum David Burnham continued and expanded this behavioral science work in the field of behavioral science and its application in industry eventually becoming president and CEO of McBer. In 2003, *Harvard Business Review (HBR)* republished an article by McClelland and Burnham entitled "Power is the Great Motivator" as an *HBR* Classic.

edge that certain management profiles better matched certain organization needs and stages, there might be other ways to bring things into balance without starting afresh. For example, we could divide the directorship into two parts with my ceding most management responsibilities to others while I concentrated on the leadership half of my role. I would have to give direction, set standards, decide "what felt like The Children's

Museum.” I would have to become more self-aware and learn how to detect when I was wandering over the boundaries, messing with other people’s work and sowing confusion. I had to stop Spocking. I had to play to my strengths and let others play to theirs—only better. I would have to give some things up. The choice was mine.

Although I did not have a lot of confidence that I could pull off a personal transformation, I was an eager student. There seemed to be an alternative to leaving the museum. I really wanted to give it a try.

We continued to meet, filling up, tearing off and tacking up pages of goals and options, diagrams of processes and structures, lists of tasks and assignments. Problems were identified. Research was taken on. Options were discussed. Decisions were made. I learned some neat tricks for analyzing the consequences of choices we might make.

I learned how to record the conversations and decisions on newsprint so that everyone in the room could monitor what was going on and progress towards meeting goals. I learned who to include broadly in generating and studying options, and the smaller group or the one person who would make the decisions. I learned to define tasks and responsibilities and follow up. I learned how to delegate—how to get power by giving hunks of it away. I learned how to charge people with responsibility, stay out of their way, and back them up. I learned how to become more self-aware, personally transparent, and frankly decisive. I began to think consciously about whether the key stakeholders were in the room, who was missing, and who else should be brought in for the decisions.

These insights and capacities came slowly, haltingly, over many years. But the first lessons were given and eagerly received around the easel and newsprint in the small McBer conference room. The very process we used, the types of decisions we made, the way we communicated within and beyond our sessions were all illustrated in the work of the consultation. At the end of 3 months I was in a new place and the museum was ready to test whether it could really change. We worked out yet another organization plan and structure that seemed to match each team’s particular goals, tasks, and working

## The Turn-Around (1970s)

### Year-end bottom lines:

1962	\$ (1,907)
1963	(7,515)
1964	3,515
1965	(9,238)
1966	(13,935)
1968 (18 mos)	(113,790)
1969	(62,347)
1970	(196,798)
1971	(95,859)
	<hr/>
	(427,173)
1972	5,957
1973	9,731
1974	3,515
1975	48,021
1976	(16,738)
1977	575
1978	12,755
1979	5,354
1980	(20,433)
	<hr/>
	(Museum Wharf)
	<hr/>
	124,831



style. Jobs were defined and firmly placed within the structure. People were offered the newly defined jobs. Some people left, a few new people were recruited. I ended my leave, we explained the new approach and how it would work during a staff retreat, and with a certain amount of healthy skepticism everyone got back to work.

### Celebration?

The changes in the museum were dramatic. The new structure worked smoothly and, with only small adjustments, was stable for the next fifteen years. Rather

## Director’s Project: How Long Did It Take?

Director to Board: need new organization plan  
Exchange of letters



Board votes for sabbatical

Spock moves to ICA: Director Project (DP) begins

Executive committee meeting: Arthur D. Little consultation proposal

4/23/70

4/29/70: Board president to executive committee  
5/6/70: Director to board president requesting sabbatical  
5/7/70: 3 Senior/honorary trustees to board president  
5/12/70: Board president replies to them

5/26/70

6/70

8/3/70

than stifling creativity and innovation, the more predictable structure seemed to free up everyone to concentrate on their real work, less distracted about who was doing what to whom and how. Clarity was increased exponentially, and staff and managers generally felt recognized and rewarded. A repeat of the original staff survey two years after I came back on the scene revealed that the organizational climate had improved with the toughest problems getting better and staff expectations of the way things should be becoming more realistic.

Even in the toughest economic times, deficits were virtually things of the past.

As my role shifted from manager to leader—the keeper of the flame—I could see that the tools we needed to run a more coherent but still non-hierarchical organization had to be found or invented. If all of us could let go of the reins

My life was changing too. I found that I actually didn't mind not being key to every detail of the museum's plans and operations. My fantasy was that if I gave away the power of managing the museum there would not be very much left for me to do. In fact there was plenty for me to do just paying attention to my job as the museum's leader. And as I had suspected, it turned out I wasn't much good as a day-to-day manager anyway.

Although I eventually got better at the few things I could not give away, my colleagues at the divisional and departmental levels were much better at managing than I was.

The museum eventually renovated a handsome old warehouse on the Boston waterfront and moved downtown from the suburban edge of the city. Attendance and income doubled again. After we stabilized our operations and finances and completed the final move in, I could take to time to think about where I could be in the next ten years, when I might be ready to retire, and what to do in the meantime. I had been director for more than twenty years and thought better of having to stay until I might retire at the end of the next. Looking back on this experience in Boston, it seemed suspiciously like another example of digging out of a hole by learning to manage myself, and the world, and the museum. Although differing in details, it felt like finally learning to read at Fieldston, becoming a swimmer in high school, figuring out how to get a college education, and getting my head

straightened out through hours of therapy. With the help of David Berlew and Steve Rhinesmith, two gifted coaches, a lot of hard work by my managerial colleagues, and a willingness to look at ourselves realistically and honestly, the museum and I had survived a shaky early marriage and came out the other side stronger, wiser, and happier. We got a lot done and had a lot of fun too.

**Part III**  
**1970s**

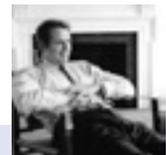
**DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP:**  
***Inventing the Tools to Make It Work***

As a recovering dyslexic, I am still a hands-on person. I like to figure out how to get things done and solve problems where the solutions are not obvious. I am fascinated by the skills and tools that allow people to create things that go beyond what we can leverage on our own.

When I dropped out of Antioch and found work apprenticing at Ted Bolle's millwork shop, I learned how to make things with wood: sash, doors, entry gates, production kitchen cabinets, furniture. Later, I divided my time between the shop floor and the mill office figuring out how to prepare working drawings so that serviceable casework could be dimensioned and built.

In that year I learned the rudiments of cabinetmaking and furniture design without leaving any fingers behind in the sawdust pile beneath unforgiving wood-working machines. This practical training turned out to be useful when I returned to school and on to my next Antioch work experience: I was turned loose to design and build exhibits at the Dayton Museum of Natural History, and, some years later in Boston, when we actually developed and installed *What's Inside?*, The Children's Museum's first hands-on exhibit.

So, whether moving exhibits out from behind glass cases, or writing challenging proposals, or inventing unconventional systems for managing the museum, the practical problem-solving at the conceptual edge of my imagination grew to become a natural part of my personal tool box and of The Children's Museum's creative repertory.



Memo to DP committee re museum status	Memo to DP & executive committees re interim reorganization	McBer hired	Interviews with staff, board; work environment/ climate survey	Eight half-day McBer consultations begin to work out new role for Spock	Staff/board retreat; new decisions announced/discussed
9/14/70	1/21/71	2/22/71	3/71	3-4/71	5/1/71

**Resulting turnaround (FY 71 & FY 72)**

Deficits end • Organization stabilizes • New roles for director/division managers • Second climate survey: better/clearer work environment

## What Do You Worry about at 4 a.m.?

A recurring anxiety of mine was having to live with the uncertainties and consequences of over-ambitious attendance projections. Decisions about next year's budget, moving to Museum Wharf, renting *The Art of the Muppets* all depended on generating enough earned income to make the numbers work. The numbers in turn were grounded on attendance estimates. Our managers and board struggled with these estimates and made their decisions, but in the big move downtown the stakeholders also included our partners in the project, potential donors and sponsors, the banks and bond underwriters, the city, and federal planning and funding agencies. We all had to be convinced of the reasonableness of our plans. The assumptions had to make sense before each budget was adopted and the Wharf and *Muppet* projects got the green light. There was a lot riding on our numbers.

As always, the first numbers didn't work. They had to be massaged: costs were cut, new money found, the underlying assumptions reexamined. Attendance projections were at the top of the list. Sometimes an expert was brought in to test our numbers, but we were acutely aware that his or our numbers were only intelligent guesses, the ultimate responsibility was in our hands. Faced with decisions to move ahead anyway, or start over, or abandon our dreams, there was tremendous pressure to push our projections to the generous side.

On the other hand, if we yielded to pressure and guessed wrong the operating budget might slide into the red, people would have to go, and cherished programs abandoned. In special cases like the *Muppets*, the renter's share of exhibition revenues came off the top

with a real possibility of a net loss adding to our worries. And of course, operating lines of credit were conditional on maintaining a balanced budget and those loans might be called in. Falling behind on Museum Wharf bond payments could lead to default and compromise both collaborating museums, perhaps fatally. So the stakes were high if we overreached. The optimistic attendance projections and all that followed would be there to haunt our dreams.

We were addicted to the daily, weekly, monthly, and cumulative admission figures. The smallest deviation was alarming. What if the trend continued? Could we recover? I would wake up with the anxiety, unable to get back to sleep. Then gradually, cumulatively, a simple and profound realization appeared to us. If we began to choose the safer low range of our estimates the uncertainty—the anxiety—would become manageable. So we got tough on ourselves and erred on the side of caution and conservatism. We absorbed painful compromises in the planning rather than digging out later. The whole psychology changed. Now we were in control. There were few alarming surprises; embarrassing admissions to the board and bank were rare. If the numbers were better than our projections we felt wonderful and looked good.

We grew to trust this approach and ourselves and began to sleep through the night.

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### Tracking the Money: Phyl O'Connell & Mary Babine

When I arrived in 1962, the budget (comfortably contained within five figures) had always been arranged along functional lines (gifts, grants, fees, and salaries, benefits, utilities, materials and supplies, postage, etc.) and was discussed and voted on by the full board. The minutes of those pre-Spock meetings showed the trustees preoccupied with minute details of how to spend the budget, but not much about policy directions. Although the term "micro management" had not yet been invented, it perfectly describes the climate of those early board gatherings. But the new young Turks on the board, who volunteered as the search committee for a new director and who interviewed me at the Midget Restaurant, had more radical designs on the soon-to-be-fifty-year-old children's museum.

Following the lead of federal guidelines that demanded separate project budgeting, tracking, and eventual auditing, the museum finances were converted into two-dimensional formats with departments (permanent) and projects (temporary) arranged across separate



Computers donated to the museum by the Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) originally of Maynard, Massachusetts, were put on the floor for visitors to use in exhibits such as the 1979-1980 *Computer Exhibit*, shown above. They were also placed in offices for administrative purposes. And sometimes, after hours, staff used these Visitor Center exhibit computers to process mailing lists and for Personnel Policy work. This is one example of how the museum staff constantly looked for creative ways to make the most out of every resource, and in the process, tying the public museum to the behind-the-scenes museum.



Bill Mayhew's ushers: Mike Spock, Mike Fitzgerald and Dave Merrill toasting the groom.

columns or pages, before being broken down into the familiar (functional) lines. Up to that time, the books were recorded in old-fashioned ledgers by our part-time bookkeeper and, when she retired, by Mary Babine, who had run the switchboard.

Before long, a third budget dimension—staff time—was added for tracking purposes to see if the budget would actually work within its projections. The actual results began to arrive in monthly reports and in the payroll from a service bureau. Finances were firmly in the hands of Phyl O'Connell (acting director and later assistant director.) When the MATCh Kits project contract arrived from the U.S. Office of Education, reports were also tracked by Fred Kresse, the project's director. Mary and Phyl's monthly and annual reports were so accurate and reassuringly well-documented that the museum also sailed through local and federal audits without incident.

If both practicality and inventiveness came naturally to us, one of our challenges was to figure out better ways of managing our money that allowed us to distribute responsibility down the line to the project and depart-

ment levels throughout the museum. We made primitive beginnings in this direction in the early days of computerized accounting in the '60s when we began to send the payroll out to a service bureau, where checks were printed, or later deposited electronically to each employee's bank account, and the numbers, with the fringe benefits subtracted, were continuously printed out on perforated computer paper and sent by mail back to Phyl O'Connell. What an incredible luxury that was!

### Inventing Better Tools: David Burnham & Tom Goldsmith

Soon, the service bureau was able to assign the payroll to each project or department, but it was awhile before every transaction could be automatically spread to line items (i.e. payroll, benefits, materials and supplies, services, travel, etc.) and, in a two-dimensional matrix, to each month's column (month actual, month budget, year-to-date actual, year-to-date budget, difference). David Burnham, board treasurer, and Phyl O'Connell, then museum associate director, brought Tom Goldsmith, a colleague of David's at McBer, in to see if together they could figure out a more rational and useful accounting system. Tom rented after-hour time on local shoe manufacturer Stride Rite's mammoth and fast IBM computer. At that time all data had to be keypunched on IBM cards and fed to the computer, which then spit out a trial printout against which every entry had to be checked by Mary Babine against her manual ledgers. But what now seems like a clunky system was in fact highly innovative and it actually worked to Phyl, Mary, and David's—and even to our auditor's—satisfaction.

When Tom moved on, he got to demonstrate to his new bosses at IBM and one of their clients, General Motors, that the revealing printouts from tiny The Children's Museum in Boston demonstrated that his accounting magic could be profitably applied to the management of their enormously complicated work too.

### License to Drive Bill Mayhew

Following Tom as a contractor to the museum was a first-year MIT student, Bill Mayhew, who so impressed DEC (Digital Equipment Company, one of the local hi-tech companies pioneering the invention and application of mini-computers beyond mainframes that only big-muscled operations like Stride Rite, universities, and the military could afford, and before PCs appeared on everyone's desks) that they began to offer the museum a

**But by and large, when you give people the tools to do their job, they don't need to look around for other things.**

**It's when you start withholding things from people that those internal struggles begin to fester.**

**While, I didn't study organizational theory before I got into [my work at the museum], certainly I learned it in real life, which is the way I learned most things, actually.**

**—Bill Mayhew**

succession of state-of-the-art equipment for both public-access and behind-the-scenes uses. With a DEC PD8 computer and UNIX operating system from Bell Labs, Bill put time-sharing terminals on the exhibit floor and adapted Tom Goldsmith's accounting packing so that he, Mary, and Phyl could actually enter all the museum's numbers directly onto our DEC computer, bypassing the time-consuming and error-prone punch cards.

The other breakthrough came when Bill figured how he could tie costs to the details of each transaction in backup pages, so that department and project managers could use their personal printouts to troubleshoot unexpected problems in each month's actuals against budget to see how they were doing. With these homemade, but ultra-sophisticated and timely accounting tools, everyone, from smallest middle managers all the way up to board members, could manage activities against expectations in ways that felt both empowering but not out on a limb!

When we became thoroughly comfortable with the utility and accuracy of our accounting package we began to sell services to the other medium-sized Boston cultural organizations.

The story of how Phyl, Mary, David, Tom, Bill, and Mike Fitzgerald, the former neighborhood kid now paid museum staff, worked together in successive collaborations starting with the simplest green-eyeshade ledgers, outside service providers, borrowed time on a big IBM machine, and then graduating to DEC's state-of-the-art hardware and the newly licensed UNIX operating system to come up with an ultra sophisticated and exceedingly useful package of budgeting and tracking tools more than a decade earlier than the field is worthy of study. Phyl and David created a climate of encouragement and experimentation in which some very young and very smart staff and consultants allowed the museum to get the maximum mileage out of each dollar without going into the red or organizationally spinning out of control.

## Values We Lived by and that Guided this Project | Mike Spock & Jim Zien



Following *Boston Stories'* first project stakeholder meeting at the St. Botolph Club (March 2005), former staff member Jim Zien came up with a list of values or attributes that he thought accurately described how The Children's Museum conducted business during those "yeasty times." He thought those values were what encouraged us to do so many interesting things without imploding as an organization or losing our sense of direction as a working community.

Jim's list was brilliant. Now identified in our project as a collective or interactive form of leadership, this lens moved our discussions forward by making us realize that it was those values that also gave us a good start at organizing *Boston Stories*.

- Community (or Communities)
- Authenticity
- Autonomy
- Collaboration
- Play (or Playfulness)
- Discovery
- Serendipity
- Experimentation
- Inclusion
- Flexibility
- Continuity
- [Purposeful] Structure

To which the stakeholders gathered that day added

- Trust
- Breadth
- Respect

## Personnel Policy Committee

We were in the trough of a massive postpartum depression after opening the new museum at Museum Wharf. We could see it coming, and we were all braced, at least intellectually. But that didn't make it any easier to deal with the sourness at a time when we should have been bathing in congratulatory good feelings.

The hardest part was the flood of anger that seemed to underlie our depression. In the drive to the opening we had pushed aside all the problems and slights that would have distracted us from our main task. We just didn't deal with them. And now we had to.

Folks were wondering if perhaps this would have been a good time to find a new job. Among the galling issues was that staff didn't think pay and promotions had been handled equitably. In fact they knew that they hadn't been! And of course, the managers thought of themselves as extraordinarily thoughtful and even-handed.

I spent a fair amount of time wandering about and talking to staff, one-on-one and collectively. The issues were everywhere.

We began to think the problems might go away spontaneously, especially as folks got a little rest and recovered from the round-the-clock pre-opening pressure. But, in spite of our defensiveness and denial, the managers realized they had allowed themselves to focus on getting the museum built, moved, and opened. Other things, like regularizing salary systems, would have to wait even though the museum had become a much more complicated organization in the process with

more jobs, staff, and things to do.

I don't remember exactly how the Personnel Policy Committee (PPC) came about, but we decided that it should take a very high priority and should involve all the staff stakeholders at every level and in all departments.

Each department was responsible for electing a representative to the committee, and all four managers (Phyl O'Connell, Pat Steuert, Elaine Heumann Gurian, and myself) were also fully engaged. About a dozen folks came to each biweekly meeting. Committee members did the homework to get ready for the next meeting.

In our first meetings we agreed that getting a more or less objective list of job hierarchies based on some form of job descriptions was in order before we could create a rational list of jobs and salaries.

It took a lot of detailed work and some contentious meetings to tackle one issue after the other. Committee reps brought issues back to their departments for review; policies and systems were adopted by staff and in some cases by the board. Solid changes began to pile up. The committee members and the folks they represented began to see that their efforts were making a difference.

Because reps were elected for staggered terms, in a few years the majority of the staff had a chance to sample and make contributions to PPC work. As a result, almost everyone got a sense that most policy decisions had both positive and negative consequences and that tradeoffs had to be made in coming to resolution in making tough policy. It was a wonderful training ground for us all.

### Interactive Leadership: What the Research Says

As happened in my life so many times before, most of the things I learned from trying to make sense of The Children's Museum's organization and my uneven leadership while doing the homework assignments and sitting around the easel in McBer's conference room ultimately seemed quite straightforward and natural: identify the obvious things to do/try next. At least for me, the things we ended up adopting were not based on organizational theory. As far as I could see, I was a nonconforming outlander using unconventional approaches that seemed to fit my non-standard personality and education. My McBer mentors were figuring out how to make me useful to the museum in spite of my quirky ways of seeing the world and the challenges it presented me.

Decades later, when I learned of new research based on comparative observations of successful and less successful organizations, I began to understand that the leadership strategies that we adopted not only fitted my non-standard education, but by then, my colleagues' and the museum's culture. They had become the model of the modern institutional leader.

In 2002, president/founder of the Burnham Rosen Group—and former McBer consultant and TCM



Through *RECYCLE* exhibit, the museum had long enjoyed collaborating with Parker Brothers Games, which had donated millions of Monopoly hats, irons, doggies, shoes, and ships and years' worth of Superman's red boots. In the 1981 *Games* exhibit at The Wharf, the company provided a look back at traditional board games in what had become the Ruth Harmony Green Hall of Toys, permanent home to the conventional hands-off exhibit of dollhouses, a favorite among audiences for many years in the old Jamaica Plain museum.



Between 1984 and 1986, important changes in Personnel Policy benefited the interpreters. A new distinction of Interpreter I or II status depending on length of time worked and the addition of a pro-rated health plan benefit were intended to encourage a longer than one-term commitment from valued floor staff, such as the two interpreters pictured above in the *Living Things* exhibit.

board member—David Burnham wrote an article called “Inside the Mind of a World-Class Leader.” In it he said, “In the 1970s, the Institutional Leader saw him/her self as the source of power. In other words, ‘Leadership is something I do to others.’ The new data from the follow-up research clearly indicate a significant change has taken place. The new Interactive Leader derives his/her power from others: the team, group or organization he/she leads. From this perspective, ‘Leadership is something I do *with* others.’”

Part IV  
2010s

LOOKING BACK:  
*Issues That Defined Us*

I hear and I forget  
I see and I remember  
I do and I understand  
—Old “Chinese” Proverb

Coming to the end of this absorbing eight-year project, I revisited some of the more memorable materials we assembled about the museum from the ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s. In preparation for writing a conclusion, I asked myself two questions: 1) Do these stories come close to reflecting the leadership issues we struggled with in those days, and how we ended up distributing responsibilities throughout the museum in less hierarchical ways? 2) Does this collection of memories and memorabilia assembled in one place offer insights for everyone about

what could be learned from *Boston Stories*? Following are the reflections that stood out for me.

### Practicing Our Values

**MY VALUES** Probably they could be traced back to my dyslexia, my struggle to come to grips with this disability, my sympathetic education at Fieldston School and Antioch College, and my parent’s model of progressive activism. Later, at The Children’s Museum during the ferment of the 1960s and 1970s, this model fit both me and the times. I guess my values, disabilities, and training wouldn’t allow me to do otherwise.

**CLIENT-CENTERED ORGANIZATION** The idea of being a client-centered organization made sense when I finally realized that children’s museums are *for* somebody (i.e. kids and their care-gives) rather than *about* something. (i.e. science, art, history, or even about the lives of children.) The closest we came to the second—and more traditional—museum M.O. was in the Ruth Harmony Green Hall that included displays of dolls and doll houses, toys and games, or Lito, the Shoe Shine Boy exhibit.

**COLLECTING ORGANIZATION** For all my reputation for being an adventurous leader in exploring new territories, I was quite conservative and mainline in some of my decisions. We thought of The Children’s Museum as a real museum with real collections. We invested a great deal in maintaining and improving collection care and record-keeping.

When we applied for accreditation with the American Association of Museums—successfully—the visiting committee made a point of noting that the museum had a great collection and took excellent care of these items. I was not about to mess with my deep commitment that TCM was a museum, even as we went full bore in the direction of hands-on learning.

**LEARNING ORGANIZATION** We had a high tolerance for experimentation, for trying things out to see if they worked. But we tried to be honest when things didn’t work, and tough on ourselves if we didn’t pay attention to the contrary evidence.

We prided ourselves in seeking out and adopting the findings of current research, the newest technologies, better ways of doing things. Working on the edge sometimes got us into trouble when we exceeded our capacities and had to wait for the world to catch up with our ambitions.

**COLLABORATIVE ORGANIZATION** Our collaborators were our clients: kids, teachers, parents, caregivers, the schools, neighborhoods, ethnic communities, other cultural organizations—and of course our staff, managers, board, and volunteers who were all avid collaborators. We thought of collaboration as one of the ways we could multiply our impact.

But collaborations took time. Collaborators had to learn each other’s concerns and languages. The usual

## Estimating Grant Contributions to the Operating Budget

As we became better and better at living within very tight budgets, an artifact of our extreme caution was playing hob with the lives of some staff (developers, design and production designers, and technicians) living from year to year on soft money—grants that would not be in place months after the spring budgeting cycle was completed. Yet we had to come up with income estimates based on the evidence on hand. We couldn't just cross our fingers and hope for the best. So, as always, we erred on the side of caution. We told our soft money staff that they were in the project budgets but we couldn't guarantee a full-time place in the operating budget until the grant notice came in—or didn't.

While we were very good at getting grants (Anne Butterfield, keeping score, claimed we hit 80 percent over the years), it didn't reassure our ability to guess which proposal would support which developer.

After many painful budget cycles and developer spreadsheets, we tried out a new variation. It fit on one

page, and after tiptoeing through some cycles we found that it worked.

We would list the proposals that were still out or would be written later; how much we had asked for; how much the funder was likely give us in the next year; how much of that reduced amount could be counted as overhead and not charged directly to project costs, and the most critical number of all, our best guess that the project would be funded. We repeated the estimate for each proposal and then calculated the bottom line for the sum all the estimates (see chart below):

So we put a line item in the budget on the income side of \$15,500. It scared us to death on the first couple of budget cycles, but we came to trust the soundness of that number, and because we were so circumspect in our estimates of the size of the grants, and the probability of getting them, we never found ourselves out on a limb. And there were fewer developers, designers and technicians hung out to dry waiting for the news of their fates.

Funder	Proposal	Grant/Yr	Indirect/Yr	Probability	Indirect Yield
Carnegie	100,000	30,000	5,000	0.60	3,000
NSF	250,000	100,000	25,000	0.40	10,000
Hyams	50,000	50,000	-0-	0.80	-0-
Riley	25,000	25,000	-0-	0.50	-0-
Stride Right	10,000	5,000	5,000	0.50	2,500
	443,000	210,000	35,000		15,500

three-year grant always seemed too short. Our best collaborations lasted for years. Funders were in love with the idea of collaboration. But we thought they were unrealistic about how hard and expensive collaboration really was.

**SELF-AWARE ORGANIZATION** “It just doesn't feel like us!” sounded like a strange criteria until we realized that this one sentence helped us communicate among ourselves and others about an opportunity we should pass up. We began to use it when everyone agreed it was an accurate reflection of our values, and that saying “no” was not an arbitrary but a value-laden decision. It was meant to be taken seriously.

**FEELING ORGANIZATION** We came to treasure taking time to share our feelings with each other. When we discovered unaddressed needs we tried to put them at the top of our agenda. This happened especially when we came face to face with important issues such as illness, death, and personal problems. We encouraged surfacing these issues when one of us was feeling overwhelmed, unappreciated, or hurt. When we were too preoccupied to deal these challenges—as in the non-stop drive to open Museum Wharf—feelings simmered anyway and

eventually had to be addressed.

**TRANSPARENT ORGANIZATION** When an idea was about to become a decision we had to ask: Who is missing? Who are the other stakeholders? It wasn't that everyone had to be in on every decision. It was only that all the stakeholders had to be heard from before the final decision was made.

Admitting to ourselves that we were in trouble—even to the board or funders—was always a comforting idea. It built trust and brought others into working on the problem with us. Denying we were in trouble could hang over these relationships like a dark cloud.

**WELL-MANAGED ORGANIZATION** Visiting professionals were usually fooled by the playful feeling of the hands-on exhibits, programs, and classroom materials into thinking of the museum not as a place of serious learning, but just a playground.

Although we thought of play as a necessary stage of early learning, this misperception deflected visiting firemen from really understanding how sophisticated and grownup we had become in managing the behind-the-scenes activities of the museum.

...One of the things I learned throughout that entire process working...at the museum was learning how to meet people where they are. Which I actually figured out from meeting six-year-olds where they were, explaining to them how to use a computer and what a keyboard was and why the letters were here and all that sort of stuff. That kind of mental shift I could apply to other situations. That learning model has recurred time after time after time, of course. If you figure out how to meet people where they were, if you take enough time to listen to them, you can figure out everything you need to know about how to reach them with your new idea and present it in a way that it becomes, oh, their new idea, too. Which I think was part of the magic of that era.

—Bill Mayhew

**WELL-LED ORGANIZATION** Although the board and managers always recognized each other as colleagues working together on shared problems, we respected each other's distinct roles.

We were well prepared for board meetings, but decisions were not worked out or rehearsed ahead of time. Everyone spoke frankly. We learned a lot from each other. Both staff and board agreed that they looked forward to these collegial meetings. Board meetings were fun!

**INTERACTIVE ORGANIZATION** In a model that depended on decentralized leadership, responsibilities were delegated broadly by inventing financial tools that empowered each leader to build and track their own department and project budgets so that division managers could oversee their work and correct things when they were getting into trouble.

Another example of shared leadership was reconstituting the Personnel Policy Committee in our collective meltdown after the Museum Wharf opening. We created a lot of policy, and everyone became a lot smarter about the tradeoffs in a way that accommodated almost everyone's feelings and needs. Elected in staggered terms by each department, the committee became a training ground for staff about how policy could be discussed and decided.

**SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZATION** The ways in which we managed everything evolved from the reality of limitations: 1) we had very little money to spare and were always trying to do more than was allowed by our limited resources; 2) administration, PR, and development were always understaffed; we spent most of what we had on programs and services for our clients; 3) the museum delegated many responsibilities down the line in a way that built leadership skills and confidence throughout the organization. The cumulative result was that as the years went by, we grew ever more confident in the reliability of our systems, more familiar with our shared culture and in the sustainability of our organization.

### The Exhibit Development Process

I began to believe—and still am convinced—there are only a finite number of really great exhibit and program ideas or topics that successfully marry the museum medium to great learning experiences. Conceiving and then exploiting those experiences is really hard. Figuring out what the experience will really be about (or not be

about) is the most critical decision that the project leader and the museum managers have to make.

Exhibit development is not a natural extension of classroom teaching. Classroom teachers are not always good exhibit developers. Exhibits are an arms-length, impersonal medium. Teachers thrive on dialogues with people. In a museum exhibit there may be no one available to help when the visitor gets stuck. Exhibit developers know how to present exhibit content to an unpredictable—and often unaided—variety of end-users—from quiet, solo visitors to exuberant school groups. (And museums also have good reasons for stationing floor interpreters (not guards) or offering docent-led tours to facilitate family and student visits!)

At The Children's Museum we thought up a new category of team leader called a "developer." Not a "curator" or even a "designer," the developer's job was to think about compelling experience for someone. Curators were passionate about things, their subject matter and collections. Developers were passionate about creating meaningful experiences for their clients (kids, parents, teachers, etc.). In this dynamic the developer, not the curator, would be the final arbiter in leading their teams. Developers usually lasted in those jobs for many years.

Exhibit developers trained the floor staff to interpret the exhibits to visitors. Under the dual title "developer/curator," developers sometimes had responsibility for their own areas of expertise and collections. In addition to exhibits, developers worked on developing programs, kits and other teaching materials. Those program-and-materials developers were the true teachers.

Developers could easily become bogged down in the minutia of their field, or in building and maintaining relationships with their home community, or, they could lose track of their goals, schedule, or budget. Elaine Heumann Gurian eventually added a new member to the development team, the "exhibit broker," who was skilled at detecting problems among team members, content, and design and how to get around those issues. The broker's role was not to be a tiebreaker or to decide the way ahead, but instead to lay out the issues and different points of view so the developer could make the final decisions and move the team ahead.

### Roles of the Players

I marveled how members of our staff found different ways to contribute different skills, experiences, and



An announcement board in the lobby of the museum listed the permanent exhibits, at left; daily activities happening within each one were chalked in beside them. Above the usual directives to restroom and telephone amenities, were two key messages to visitors that also say a lot about the ethos of the museum:

“We are thinking about ways to explain our exhibits. We have more words now than we have had in a long time. Is that a good idea?”

We think of ourselves as a laboratory. Every exhibit is experimental. We build them out of inexpensive materials. Some exhibits last a long time, but most of them change continuously. Tell us what you think.”

attitudes to our work. I found that, at least in my mind, they seemed to cluster into distinct roles.

**VISIONARIES** Unique in both the depth of their passions and the persistence of their visions, visionaries were apt to be a handful: often uncompromising, difficult to manage, sometimes stuck on un-useful approaches. However, what they contributed to their clients, to the museum, and to their professions was profound. We thought they were definitely worth the trouble. Their work made us especially proud to be associated with the museum. Examples were Joan Lester, Bernie Zubrowski, Jeri Robinson, Phylis Morrison, Karen Ann Zien, Sue Jackson, BJ Clemson, Anne Hawley, and me working on *What's Inside?*, the Grouping Birds MATCH Kit, and the Visitor Center, in my early tenure at the museum in the '60s.

**DEVELOPERS AND DOERS** Insightful and flexible practitioners they seemed to successfully balance their commitments to their clients, their content, and their favorite media. They worked wherever they were needed, and were willing schleppers. Examples of insightful developer/doers were Ruth Green, Judy White Marsolini, Jenefer Merrill, Nancy Olson, Binda Reich Colebrook, Sharon Williamson, Ed Grusheski, Janet Kamien, Aylette Jenness, Dottie Merrill, Sylvia Sawin, Leslie

Bedford, Leslie Swartz, Sonnet Takahisa, Kyra Montagu, Sue Jackson, and me while working on starting the Metropolitan Cultural Alliance, the Cultural Education Collaborative, and the move downtown in the '70s.

**DESIGNERS AND PRODUCERS** Inventive and skillful, they had style. They made things that actually worked and made the museum look terrific. They loved to work on problems, even taking on challenges where none might not have actually existed. Examples of these creative inventors were Michael Sand, Eric von Schmidt, Duncan Smith, Bob Horn, Sing Hanson, Lennie Gottlieb, Andy Merriell, John Spalvins, Bill Mayhew, Tom Goldsmith, John Sloan, Chuck Redmon, John Stebbins, Paul Dietrich, and Andy Bartholomew.

**STRATEGISTS AND ORGANIZERS** Division, department, and project managers and collaborators led the work of their teams in the planning and management of their programs, projects, and budgets. They were tough but fair. They were smart and analytical, and they loathed going over budget. Among the great team leaders were Phyl O'Connell, Fred Kresse, Cynthia Cole, Betty Nicol, Dorothy Clarke, Pat Steuert, Jim Zien, Elaine Heumann Gurian, Anne Butterfield, Janet Kamien, Eleanor Chin, Suzanne LeBlanc, Susan Porter, Natalie Faldasz, Jonathan Hyde, Judy Flam, Tom Sisson, Bob

**We had three layers of reports and a couple of report slices across departments—ways to find the numbers...so you could have an organizationally collaborative discussion about what the data means and what it tells you about what you can do....[But] if people can see these transactions and don't trust each other, or just don't use it constructively, it can be a very friction-causing device in the organization. Phyl basically said, "Let's not worry about that. Let's concentrate on getting the information, presenting it with the integrity that it needs to have." Rolling up to a total means that there's integrity in every part as long as the arithmetic and the architecture of the system is right. The computer program that does it starts to be incidental. The important thing is the management, the way it uses it, its willingness to be open.**

—Tom Goldsmith

Lloyd, Susan Jackson, Jephtha Wade, David Burnham, Kyra Montagu, Yori Oda, John Bok, Sue Pucker, Elvira Growdon, Drew Hyde, Andy Fallender, Polly Price, Duncan Smith, Bob Corcoran, Dave Berlew, Dan Prigmore, George Hein, and finally me trying to figure out how to lead the museum in the '80s.

### The Fundraising Process

I discovered early on that I was not very good at asking individuals—people who had personal fortunes—to give us money. However, I was pretty good at approaching colleagues—people who earned their living by giving other's people money away.

Our successes initially came from such folks as Bill Bender at the Committee of the Permanent Charity Fund, or Fred Kresse bringing a draft proposal of a multi-media classroom kit to a new grant officer at the United States Office of Education, or Jim Craven, our Jamaica Plain state rep, stopping by at the opening of the new Visitor Center. They were looking for places to get some impact for their effort and money. We were just off-center enough to have caught their attention.

Timing was everything. We became nimble at learning about new, soon-to-be-advertised federal and foundation programs and got to the head of the line. We became good at learning the interests of program officers and creative in drafting applications that matched the museum's interest in starting programs and projects that matched the funders' guidelines.

Later the managers and Anne Butterfield became famous for mounting exploratory trips to Washington and New York with what we began to refer to as "walking papers" in hand. Armed with these outlines and conversations, they became very good at writing smart proposals with reasonable budgets, and, therefore, the museum became extraordinarily successful in getting them funded.

Writing a proposal was always seen as a form of planning, a good way of figuring out and then sharing those plans within the museum and among potential funders. What were our goals and costs, and how did we propose to make the plan real?

Even if the timing was not good, delaying action on a plan or requiring a better set of guidelines, hammering out a rough working paper was money in the bank.

When the right timing or right foundation did finally make sense, a walking paper could be turned into a real proposal without much delay. Having a string of ideas or walking papers tucked into our briefcases, ready to go, allowed us to grab and act on these pregnant opportunities when they unexpectedly appeared. Some of these ideas had been marinating for many years before we could act, but in the meantime we had no compunction about walking away from marginal ideas because the funding just didn't fit our vision.

By contrast, meetings with potential individual donors were a time for listening—not talking or selling. These conversations gave lots of useful information about what turned each prospect on. It took several years for me to learn that lesson of listening. After that fundraising became a pleasure, not a chore.

### The Decision-Making Process

When an idea was about to become a decision you had to ask yourself: who was missing? Who were the other stakeholders? It wasn't that everyone had to be in on every decision. It was only that all the stakeholders had to be heard before the decision was made.

Recording meetings on large pads of newsprint kept everyone "on the same page." Nothing was hidden. Everyone was encouraged to challenge and correct the recorder's interpretation of what was said and what was meant. Sticking these pages up on the meeting room walls, taking them to the typist after the meeting, and distributing these as notes to all stakeholders—whether they were in attendance or not—became a record of the meeting and decisions that everyone could count on. We felt naked when this system of shared note-taking was neglected. In fact my obsession with newsprint, smelly markers, drafting tape, and easels was learned at the feet of my McBer mentors and became a source of amusement to staff, board, and colleagues until they saw the light, too.

Brainstorming was a way of getting things out there where everyone could see, consider, and build on each other's ideas. The rules were: don't edit your own or other's ideas; the more ideas the better; critical thinking and decision-making should happen after—not during—brainstorming; criteria for choosing or ranking ideas could be prioritized only after brainstorming was over.

Underestimating attendance (therefore income) was always a good strategy. If you failed to make your numbers it made you feel awful throughout that budget period. Not only did you lose sleep, but it was hard to recover from the loss in the middle of a project or budget year. If you exceeded your estimate you looked very smart, and even more importantly, felt terrific!

During tough budgeting sessions (these were never easy since we were always working to protect our wonderful programs and key staff) we were usually trying to figure out how much non-budgeted income we could anticipate before the grants and cash were actually in hand. Otherwise, we had to let people and hours go and then rehire folks later if the grant came in. We finally figured out how to calculate simple probabilities of possible grant income in a way that reassured the board that we were not in danger of going over the cliff, and the staff that they still had a job. The system of probabilities worked. We never were caught without the bridge we needed to smooth out cash flow.

### The Big Questions

Here are some of the bigger questions and decisions I was involved in that didn't follow our deliberate effort at getting all the stakeholders involved and being thoroughly transparent.

**Free or Charge?** As described earlier (see pages 4-5), my first real challenge was that the museum was free. It was clear that we were stuck with an inadequate budget, even to sustain existing programs. We already had too much to do without taking on excursions into new territory, which was exactly the course I hoped to pursue. The board's annual appeal seemed maxed out, and Museum Aid's Christmas Bazaar was already in place. Although I had no experience with proposal writing I understood that project grants might be a way of getting new things started, if not a particularly good strategy for maintaining a program. If we wanted a healthy budget we needed to go for earned income.

But charging for a *children's museum* really seemed awful, maybe even counterproductive! The board, staff, and I clearly had to develop a compensatory arrangement for—using the old-fashioned term—“needy families.” We screwed up our courage, put the plan in place, and hoped it would work.

Attendance soared! But it was more than a decade before families caught on to Free Friday Nights, and Jim Craven's midnight maneuver made it possible to let school and community groups in free of charge.

**Resign or Relearn?** Overwhelmed by my managerial inadequacies, I had to decide during the Director Project whether I should resign and turn over the reigns to another leader, or whether I could learn enough fast enough to make adjustments to my role so that I could continue without jeopardizing the museum and even help the museum grow and prosper.



Jeri Robinson welcomed the young audience to the museum with open arms.

With my McBer colleagues, we constructed a model of shared leadership where I figured out a way to delegate most of the roles I had collected over my first seven years, moving managers into roles where they had the skills and vision to take over their divisions and leaving me with the tasks that I should have been doing all along and could not be delegated to others. It took me a while before I learned not to wander, uninvited, into someone else's turf, but I was a motivated learner and my newly refocused role soon became second nature.

**Babies or Collections?** When I fell in behind Jeri Robinson's drive to make a big push towards accommodating preschool kids and their caregivers, I recognized that it would be the most profound change yet in the museum's profile of users, in the museum's programs, and ultimately in the missions of all children's museums thereafter. As I had predicted, as the audience changed, most middle-age kids now saw the museum as for “babies” and no longer for them.

Therefore, curating cultural artifacts and offering multicultural programming and exhibits tended to be beside the point. At the time it was thought that, developmentally, preschoolers were at the age where they could not use or make much sense of cultural collections or experiences like the *Japanese House*.

While the house is still part of the museum's ambitious Japanese Program it once included the Japanese collection, study storage, temporary and touring exhibits, seasonal celebrations, collaborations with Harvard's East Asian Studies Program, teacher and floor staff training, classroom kits, project grants, community advisors, and the program's specialized staff. We called these comprehensive thematic areas “Plum Puddings” into which you were invited to stick in your conceptual thumb and pull out interrelated resources or learning experiences.

The plum pudding model was unsustainable, and as key staff members moved on, comprehensive areas



Mike and Drew Hyde, former director of the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston, reconnect in 2005 under Christo's Central Park artwork installation, *The Gates*. Hyde was the director of the ICA when it served as Mike's sabbatical office "hideout" in 1970 at the beginning of the transformative Director's Project.

were gradually retired. How to provide broad audiences, including very young children, with authentic cultural experiences with real objects is a continuing challenge. What to do with the collection—including the Japanese House—awaits future decisions by leaders of the board, staff, and the community.

**Move or Stay?** Should the museum stay put and continue to live comfortably at the suburban edge of the city or move downtown? As John Bok was fond of saying, "Downtown is where the people are, Jamaica Plain was where the people aren't." In a radial city like Boston, downtown is the hub where all the transportation systems come together. And in a city of often hostile neighborhoods, in order to serve everyone, you also had to be on neutral turf. Everyone needed to feel equally welcome. No one was allowed to claim exclusive ownership of the museum.

But even as I and most of the board were itching to move, the assessment of our readiness conducted in the mid-'60s by fundraising counsel Bob Corcoran came back with the news that we could not make the move until 1) The Children's Museum became more top of everyone's mind; 2) we had exploited our Jamaica Plain site to the max and had run out of useable space; and 3) we could find an affordable and adaptable site that met the museum's needs and would be seen as an attractive home for visiting families, school and neighborhood groups.

It took sixteen years of searching, planning, fundraising, construction, and moving to achieve those goals. In the meantime we converted the old auditorium into an interim Visitor Center before the move to Museum Wharf. And still for all the lengthy and careful planning, our shaky relationship with Museum of Transportation partner almost brought us all down together!

### Sustainability

Although our pace of change could be blindingly fast, the fact that most of us learned our craft and stayed at the museum for many years made a huge difference in our stability, especially when we looked back to see progress. We took the time to build a common culture.

In communities like Boston, where governments are not the primary source for subsidizing cultural organizations, museums are dependent on both earned income (admissions, fees, sales, contracts, participant memberships) and contributed income (gifts, grants, endowments). For clients who can't afford the admission fees, strategies must be found to lower the barriers and compensate for economic access problems.

The museum was very good at finding new sources of income or new ways of saving money. But these sources and savings were inevitably absorbed by inflation and the ends of each soft money grant. So at the beginning of the next budget cycle we had to always find yet a new source of savings and/or income to balance the budget.

Part of our stability could be attributed to the project directors' and managers' use of sophisticated financial tools and their commitment to transparency. This combination allowed them to manage their budgets successfully while admitting and asking for help when the numbers told them a project was in trouble. Program officers and auditors could relax, always knowing where they stood with us. There would be no surprises!

