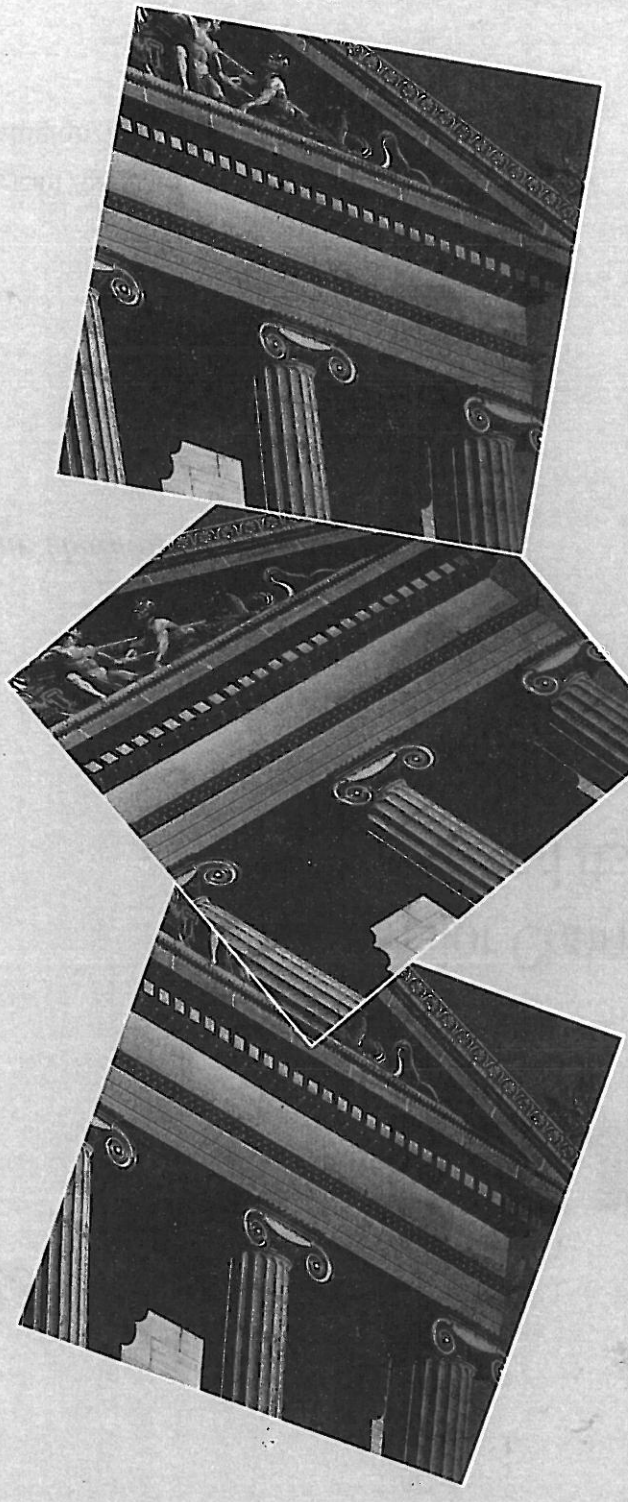
Institutional Trauma



Major Change in Museums and Its Effect on Staff

Elaine Heumann Gurian, Editor

American Association of Museums

Institutional Trauma

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American Association of Museums
Washington, D.C.
1995

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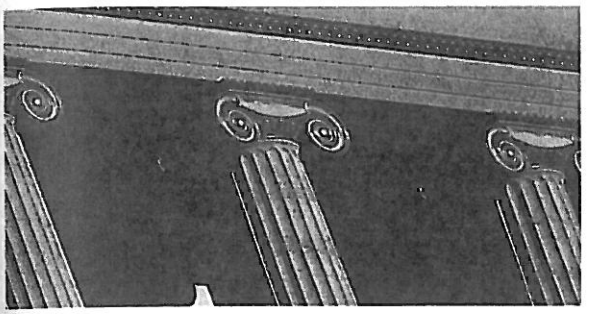

Moving the Museum

The Children's Museum, Boston

Elaine Heumann Gurian

Introduction

I came to the The Children's Museum (TCM) in 1971 to become Exhibit Center director and part of a management team of three division directors who worked under Michael Spock, the museum's director. Under unusual arrangements, I was responsible for the planning, designing and building of exhibitions as well as the hiring, training and, if need be, the disciplining of the interpretative and operations staff. The division directors had autonomy in their own areas, designed their own staffing systems and created and managed their own budgets. Each week the division directors (known as the managers) met together with Mike to deal with issues that were museum-wide. Our agreement to a joint policy was crafted with patience and by consensus. There was never a vote taken and rarely was a decision imposed by the director. The members of the management group respected and trusted each other.

The Children's Museum under Michael Spock was known for its humanistic, familial tone. Our style was friendly and informal. For most of the staff, the museum work was part of their creative life. This made us a cohesive organization filled with an almost nationalistic fervor. In some ways, we were a unique museum.

The question then arises: Is the following experience about physically moving The Children's Museum so idiosyncratic that it is of little use to anyone else? I have questioned a small sample of staff from other institutions who have been involved in a move or a building expansion, and their responses have mirrored our own in form, though they were different in detail. I believe that there were important lessons learned in our case that can be of real benefit to others.

This, then, is an attempt to reflect on our particular move, some 15 years after the opening of The Children's Museum at Museum Wharf, in order to be helpful to readers who may find themselves in similar situations.

Background

On July 1, 1979, The Children's Museum opened in its new home on the waterfront in downtown Boston. Since its inception in 1913, the museum had always been located in the more suburban Jamaica Plain. One hundred eighty thousand visitors annually tried to cram into 7,000 square feet of public space At peak times there was often an hour's wait to get into the Exhibit Center. We were unable to accommodate a larger audience and faced rising staff costs. Our decision to move was prompted by economic necessity. We decided to move and grow rather than to stay and suffocate.

Studies projected our potential market at between 400,000 and 600,000 annual visitors

if we located ourselves more centrally, close to public transportation and in a more ethnically neutral area. Armed with this information and with the commitment of the museum's board, the move took place after nearly 10 years of planning, primarily by Michael Spock. He looked at more than 15 sites, commissioned a detailed report on four of them, and conducted a full-scale feasibility study on two.

During the previous three-and-a-half years (1975-1979), The Children's Museum simultaneously ran a capital campaign, expanded the Resource Center, and planned, tried-out, built, stored and finally installed new exhibits. We closed our previous site to the public for only 10 weeks, packed, moved staff (with the exception of the collections and the design and production studio, which we moved later), and we opened at the beginning of our busiest season, the summer of 1979. We started with nine separate opening events.

With this move to Boston's rejuvenated waterfront, our public space increased from 7,000 to 18,000 square feet and our attendance went from 180,000 to 470,000 in the first year. Ten thousand people went to the opening parties, and by the end of the first 12 weeks, 180,000 visitors came, the same number we served during the entire previous year.

The staff was both proud and exhausted. It was primarily the staff that accomplished this move, focusing on the external task but at the same time experiencing a range of feelings.

The following is a recounting of the events and the attendant patterns of staff behavior for the years preceding opening (primarily 1976-1979) and for the first operating year (July 1979-July 1980) as seen through the eyes of the director of the Exhibit Center.

Staff Involvement in the Planning Process

Planning for the museum began in 1974 with both the senior management and the board committed to relocation. The staff was invited to go on a retreat held at a rural inn. Collectively, they suggested goals for the museum and the program that would result and listed their needs for individual work space. The retreat was hard work done in an informal atmosphere. It became a cohesive experience that remained as an island of idealism and optimism throughout the difficult months that followed. Each individual was asked to complete a workbook for use later by the planners. Some thought the workbook was impractical, too casual in tone and filled with dreams. It subsequently proved useful as a reference tool. It was sometimes even prophetic.

At the same time, some members of the staff and board were invited by Michael Spock to form the program committee that was charged with formulating the future program of the museum and its space implications. The committee met monthly and issued memos that were circulated among all staff for consideration and comment. The process, though

vague and only occasionally interesting, was, in retrospect, useful. Meeting every month with key staff and board members helped synthesize collective thinking and make it more practical. The time devoted to the process allowed the entire staff to understand and then to "buy in" to a collective dream. The program committee document, when finished and circulated, allowed staff to make independent but compatible decisions within their own spheres.

Over the next two years (1974-1976), there were many other meetings with the whole staff and specialized groups. Lists were made of everything from names of potential co-tenants to desirable paint colors. Staff from the divisions were not used to looking at overall museum issues and none of us had learned how the planning process worked. Sometimes the meetings seemed endlessly repetitious and filled with wishful thinking, and kept us from what we thought of as our primary work, running the existing public facility.

There came a time for me and many of my co-workers when we were "planned out." Moving seemed remote, irrelevant and often unreal. From that point on, either we did not go to planning meetings or we went with desultory interest and a great deal of skepticism. Our churlishness lasted a long time (1975-1977) and our attitude changed only when we began to feel that at last the move was imminent. Despite our irritation, our skill in planning improved and we became more useful members of the team in spite of ourselves.

Getting Ready

We bought our new building in 1975, four years before we opened. We took all the staff to see the old wool warehouse in a section of Boston that had not yet been rediscovered. We arrived on a cold and gloomy day in rented school buses. There are photos to record that event and one can see how the staff divided between the excited and the totally disbelieving.

The staff understood very quickly that the process of renovation was one in which we did not have expertise. It became essential for us to rely on outside experts and our director for guidance. We were used to relying primarily on ourselves and we expressed hesitancy and some distrust working with "strangers." We absorbed some of the "experts" and made them into family and heroes. Some, however, became the "enemy" and the externalized lightning rods of our anger. Because so much of the future appeared murky and blind faith was sometimes the only way forward, our trust in Mike was fortunately well founded. By 1975 he had been at the museum for 13 years and was a known quantity who was admired and respected.

The project seemed more or less real to us depending on how much it affected our

daily work at any given moment. Some of the serious hurdles seemed quite remote, like putting the bank funding package together. Some seemed quite immediate, like a threatened strike by the union construction workers against the open-shop policy.

The fund-raising staff worked in a trailer at the wharf site for two years. For them, the new museum was more real than our operation in Jamaica Plain and they viewed the rest of the staff as interlopers. Mike gave up his desk in Jamaica Plain and appeared there once a week to occupy a table in a meeting room. With all the attention of the senior staff focused downtown, the staff entrusted with running the "old" museum began to feel devalued and forgotten. They took on a certain martyred quality.

During the two years before we opened, staff were experiencing waves of feelings that ranged from optimism to petulance. This seemed to change daily. One staff member entered into a phase of secession. She decided that whatever swirled around her, she would remain unaffected because emotionally she was no longer there—she was in a mythical Miami. She continued to do her daily work effectively but took no part in anything that had to do with moving. Although all of us could have profited by taking a lesson from her and paying a little less attention to our own anxiety, we could not have condoned the actions of many staff members like her. In reality, she left us to do all the organization required for the move. But she was a beloved staff member, and no one really resented her. On the day we moved, she came with us and remained an important member of the staff.

The Effect of Installation on the Design and Production Staff

The building renovators were supposed to produce finished exhibition space ready for installation by January for the July opening. Because of threatened strikes and construction delays beyond our control, we never had any totally finished space up to and including opening day. Further, because our production team was not unionized, we were advised not to let them install when the construction was going on for fear that the unions would bring the entire project to a halt.

The design and production (D&P) staff had built exhibits continuously for 18 months. The exhibits were stored everywhere including a rented truck container on the grounds. We promised D&P clean, finished space ready for exhibition installation beginning January 1st. They prepared an installation and construction schedule that was achievable because it was phased. They grew understandably anxious as each new day went by without their being allowed to begin. As February and March went by they became very angry at me, Mike and the construction team for having failed to deliver on our promised schedule. Their good will for the project was diminished and their faith in me as their leader was at a low ebb. D&P leadership thought that they would be personally blamed

when (no longer if) the installation was not completed on time, because we, the museum staff, would collectively fail to remember the construction hold-ups and would assume either poor planning or incompetence on their part. Their professional pride and reputations were at stake. Feelings of anger and frustration ran understandably high. I felt impotent and took to a series of "raised voice" sessions with the construction manager—to no avail.

Thus, 10 weeks before the opening, I understood that to install the exhibits (and possibly still open on time), we would just have to work with the construction going on around us and the construction workers still in the building. From then on, we referred to "The Christopher Columbus theory of installation" and used the motto "All land we conquer is ours!" Every day we loaded finished exhibitions into a truck and drove to the unsecured, under-construction space and installed them.

The building construction crew were not used to working side by side with museum carpenters who included women and pony-tailed men. Some of our carpenters had chosen to work at the museum because it suited them better than traditional construction jobs and they were hostile to the construction milieu. Some construction workers greeted the museum installers with leers and name-calling. The women carpenters got alternately militant and conciliatory, with many conversations arising about capitulating and changing their uniform from the jeans and T-shirts that all carpenters wear to something less revealing.

However, what started out as hostility eventually ended in mutual respect when each side came to appreciate the real skill the others brought to their work. They began to know each other's names and to understand that each side was interested in a museum for children. Not surprisingly, each side had to confront and let go of stereotypes in order ultimately to work well together.

The Effect of Collections Installations on Curators

We planned to install museum collections in phases, as well. In our modest planning space known as the "war room," schedules showed dates that announced the end of each exhibit installation and the beginning of the collection installation. To make up for lost time, we had to install collections and exhibits simultaneously. This was not only a conservational compromise, but in this process the collections were potentially insecure. The building was wide open, and authorized and unauthorized workers were everywhere. We had expected to have very few cases open at any one time so we could monitor them closely. Instead, we installed as fast as we could and hired unbudgeted security officers (really college kids on summer holiday) to sit by each case until it was closed, to protect the objects from theft.

The curators had always been responsible for the state and security of the collections. They had nurtured them and now they were being told to install under conditions that appeared to be neither safe nor secure and included paint fumes and construction dust. Furthermore, the curators were being told to compromise their professional standards by people they liked and trusted. They were understandably upset. We, the supervisors, were in emotional upheaval as well, as we tried to decide if our standards could be temporarily lowered. All of us tried to invent systems that would let curators install with some measure of comfort while continuing to move the project forward. We compromised by commandeering a room, setting it up exclusively for collections. There was space enough to lay out cases prior to installation and there were temporary but appropriate security systems. This meant diverting the computer personnel from working on their permanent installation, which caused them to ruin their schedule, as well. It took them more than a year to recover from this delay. Every change caused more and more staff to be faced with tasks that seemed impossible to complete as the deadline fast approached.

The Effect of Unfinished Offices on Staff

The office space construction was not completed either, but for a different reason. In our planning, the management had agreed to maximize our income by using our first capital funds to open as much exhibition and public space as we could afford. We would delay the building of finished space for offices until the completion of the second capital campaign and live collectively within the unimproved space for the subsequent six years. While the staff understood the reasons for this, it meant that people were moving from finished, though makeshift offices in Jamaica Plain to unfinished, sometimes unheated camping-out spaces at Museum Wharf—a clear step down in some cases.

The TCM staff completed the move with remarkable good humor, working very hard to get the opening ready. They did not focus on their offices or understand what these would ultimately look like because every space was knee-deep in packing cases. It would be later, after the opening, that the reality of living in the uncomfortable office situation would add to the built-up anger.

Managers

During the final 10 weeks we all often felt optimistic, confident and encouraged. It was an exciting time.

Alternatively, with the rush to open, managers also felt afraid that their tasks would not be done on time and they would appear incompetent, while still having to be supportive of others. We would often seek each other out, close the door and emotionally reveal our

anxieties. The need for peer support during these times was critical, not so much for substantive advice as for real succor.

Two weeks before the new site opened, Michael Spock and I found that most of the decisions for which we were responsible had been made, and that we were virtually out of work. There was no "directing" needed now. Only physical work remained to be done. We applied to the construction crew for manual work and were accepted. We both arrived daily in work clothes, eager to be included. We would slip out of the roles only occasionally and only when a decision was needed that forced us to assume our old positions. I don't think the crew knew how grateful we were. Sitting by without sufficient work during this stressful time would have been impossible. Because the staff was used to a matrix form of decision making, they did not have any trouble giving us orders and, most of the time, we clearly understood that we worked for them.

The "charrette" associated with exhibition installations, like theater openings, bonds people. The pressure of installation, while stressful, was relieved by rituals, practical jokes, silly gags and late-night pizzas. It was a time filled with private language that made it difficult for anyone other than the initiated to break in. This behavior helped us get through the war. However, it had the attendant difficulty of creating a "them and us" situation. When the shop was later moved to a separate location, it set D&P apart from the rest of the staff for a long time.

Two days before we opened we found that, miraculously, we had completed construction on time and under budget, with only finishing touches left to do. On that day, every content specialist visited me to tell me with certainty that all the other exhibits were better than his or hers and it was clearly my fault. By each one in turn, I was accused of favoritism for someone else.

On that same day, the construction part of D&P declared that they would no longer work for their supervisor and that they wanted him fired. They revealed that they had been watching him carefully, noting his seeming insensitivity, but had not wanted to come to me until the job was finished. During the preceding weeks, unknown to me, members of the construction team had been meeting, sharing their discontent with each other and planning their course of action. It is fair to say that their perception of the difficulty was exacerbated by the pressure they were under. For 10 weeks, they had been working 10 hours a day, six days a week trying to remain on schedule.

The day before opening I spent in individual negotiations with every member of D&P. At the end of the day, I held a joint meeting. I wanted to be able to open with a team that was at least pasted back together enough to receive well-deserved congratulations. I found myself openly commiserating with some of the charges, but reiterating my support and loyalty to the supervisor who had worked devotedly and long for the museum. This

meant letting people understand that I had made a decision and if they forced me to choose between them or him, I would choose him. I, and others, attempted to get everyone to soften their positions so that there would be no need for an immediate mass exodus.

We succeeded only partly. Some temporary members were scheduled to leave immediately anyway. We urged one uncompromising ringleader to leave, too. Some valued members' feelings never healed; these people left within the first six months. One outspoken member stuck it out and made her truce permanently with the leader. After all that work, the opening was only bittersweet for the D&P crew.

At two in the morning on the day before the opening, filled with fatigue and elation, I walked around the completed Exhibit Center, showing it to Mike, and I burst into tears.

Private Openings

On June 24, 1979, we began opening the museum with nine separate events. The smartest thing we did was to focus on ourselves first. Our first opening was exclusively for all the workers, including staff, volunteers and construction workers, and their immediate families. There was evident pride in being able to show all this work to one's children. This would reap benefits during the next weeks and long after.

We held an additional family event so that all TCM workers could invite any five members of their family, however they chose to define family. It was poignant to see parents of adult children congratulating each other for bringing these gifted people into the world. It was important to remember that we, as staff, needed to be recognized by our families, including our parents, even though we were "grown up."

A separate opening was held for professionals. All staff were allowed to define that term and invite colleagues as they saw fit. This allowed staff to thank the people who had helped them individually. Not only the board, directors and fund-raisers had "chits" outstanding; every single member of staff had asked for important favors within his or her own specialty and needed to repay them.

That evening, I gave a toast that saluted TCM staff and their monumental accomplishment. As I asked them to stand, an emotional roar went up from the crowd. Our staff were being cheered by their professional peers who understood best the meaning of their achievement.

Public Opening

We closed Jamaica Plain the day after April vacation week, a high attendance time, and remained closed during the traditionally slow months of May and June. We opened at the

Wharf on July 1, the beginning of the tourist season and the busiest two months in the calendar year. This meant that we could not practice operating with just a few people in the building, or orient ourselves before the crowds came. In the first 12 weeks, with the attendant promotion, 180,000 visitors came, the same number we served during the entire previous year.

The new exhibition environment was significantly different from the one we were used to, so that our try-outs in Jamaica Plain were not entirely relevant. At the Wharf site, we had more visitors, a reduced staff/visitor ratio and a radically different lay-out. While we had field-tested all the concepts and even sections of the exhibits, rarely had an exhibit been tested in its entirety.

The visitors came and touched our pristine interactive museum. Immediately, everything that could break, broke, and every system that could fail, failed. We wanted to rush on to the public space and yell "Go home! Stop messing it up!"

The staff primarily responsible for running the Jamaica Plain site while the rest of us installed, closed and packed it up now moved to the Wharf. They set up their office, hired and trained new staff and got ready to run the new museum. They had been left out of the excitement for a long time and felt quite heroic. Now they became the front line.

Every evening at closing, the operating managers got together and invented new systems to replace the ones that failed that day. Fortunately, we had a team of experienced staff whom we enfranchised to "punt" by inventing new systems on the spot. We promised we would reward, not punish, staff for individual initiative.

An example of a complex system that kept failing was the operation of the entrance hall with its ticketing function. When we planned the lobby we understood all the functions, worked with architects, had experienced staff ready, trained new staff and had many rehearsals. Even so, we knew we had a compromise situation because we had too many functions jammed into one place. Some of the elements we could contended with were the size, shape and location of the space, the speed of ticketing, the reliability of the computer, the need to get statistics, the traffic flow, signage, group orientation, the varying number of staff needed to match the hourly attendance curve, and handicap access. In some instances, the solution to one problem competed with and hindered solving another, no less important function. For example, faster ticketing moved the waiting line quickly, yet the best place to gather statistics was at the ticket desk, which then slowed down this process. We "took our best shot" at the operation of the lobby and only partially succeeded.

Things broke and systems did not work, but it was not because we hadn't anticipated the problems, or properly planned or trained. Rather, it was because we had not known how to solve some dilemmas. Therefore, we did not know how to repair them either. We

remained optimistic for the first week or so when we thought we could correct the difficulties easily. In the next six months, we were depressed, though no less dogged, when it became apparent that the solutions were cumulative and minutely detailed. We would only fully understand the necessary steps retrospectively when whatever had been broken was finally fixed. In a process of closer and closer approximation, when each of the adjustments seemed insignificant, and when changing one element could create an entirely new situation, there was very little measurable satisfaction. The process was draining, and the pressure to get it right quickly was high. The staff needed constant optimistic support. It was an unglamorous time and followed immediately on the most enervating time of all, the rush to open. We tried to compensate by extolling publicly the "unsung heros" who were turning us into a fully functioning museum, but it seemed hollow as we slogged ahead.

We discovered, much to our surprise, that in order to fix any operation problem, we had to "throw money at it," often by hiring more staff. We also discovered we had to make the system more complex before we could simplify it again. Once the problem was solved, though we were now overstaffed, we could extrapolate and design a more efficient system for less people.

Although needing to revamp the staffing pattern, the operations staff felt guilty about spending unplanned money and so were caught in a bind. They didn't know if, by solving one problem, they were creating a new one—an unmanageable budget. They tried to do without, didn't ask for help soon enough and felt angry and defeated. When the problem was finally articulated, a decision was made by the directors and board to overspend the first year's budget. That at least allowed us to ease the strain.

A new problem arose. It was difficult to know what kind of commitment to make to new staff when hiring, because we did not know what would become of the new positions. Ultimately, in some instances, people and jobs remained. In other instances, jobs were abolished but the people stayed. In still other cases, jobs and people both went. At the time, we did not have clear job categories or any absolute differentiation among temporary, permanent and contract staff, although we used all those terms. We did not have clear compensation categories or criteria for job descriptions. Each division hired separately. It appeared that some people might be getting more money for the same work by working for one division over another or by being declared on contract rather than salary. This made the existing staff feel insecure as evident reorganization was going on. They were angry about perceived inequities. Had we predicted this need for hiring new, possibly temporary help, we could have allayed many of the staff fears.

Rest

At the time of the opening, we put a six-week moratorium on all vacations, thinking that we should have extra help immediately available to cover any unexpected emergency. As it turned out, we could use only trained floor staff and thus, we did not deploy the rest of the people we had held up.

Emotionally, everyone thought in two phases: before and after the opening. With the pressure of running the new museum, unpacking and beginning new courses, every member of the staff suddenly understood that the opening was not the end of anything but part of a continuum of seamless pressures. Everyone was physically exhausted and needed time off as a psychological pause between the move and the continuous operation of the institution. In retrospect, delaying vacations was a serious mistake.

Unpacking

The development people had been on site for two years, working in a trailer and assorted nearby offices. They wondered what the rest of us interlopers were doing there now. The operations people had moved weeks before the opening and had already partially unpacked. After the opening, the people most closely involved with the installation began to unpack.

The staff of the Resource Center—the division responsible for housing all the resource materials and for running outreach and multi-session programs—felt great strain. They wanted the public to see the variety of things they had to offer from the beginning. Since content specialists (developers) worked for both the Resource and the Exhibit Center and they had concentrated on installing their exhibits prior to opening, they had to focus on getting their resources and teaching materials unpacked immediately afterward.

Because every department had apportioned insufficient time to unpack, some staff took more than a year to get fully settled in. They always felt behind and rushed to catch up. This added to their feelings of disorientation and inefficiency, and led to their anger at management for being insensitive to their work needs.

Meeting on the Stairs

There were daily work schemes that all the staff had unconsciously integrated in Jamaica Plain. These had to do with meeting people on the stairs, in the bathrooms, by the mail boxes and on the way to and from meeting rooms. Staff members knew whom they sat next to and whom they would encounter as they progressed through their work day. People saved information for those seemingly random meetings and accomplished a great deal of sharing in that way. In moving to the Wharf, all these fragile and unconscious con-

nections were broken. Staff could not automatically find the people they needed without a new, conscious plan. Similarly, equipment like copying machines appeared in unfamiliar locations and caused new and unfamiliar patterns of behavior to form.

Some people who previously were in the hub of things now found themselves isolated, and others who had gotten used to quiet now found their quarters noisy. Many of the same groups of people were housed together, but some new combinations had been made that required new staff connections. Some people missed their former office mates, while other staff found it exciting to be with new colleagues.

Watershed

Designers, fabricators, curators and developers had been in the limelight for many months before the opening and initial congratulations focused on them. Afterward, the operations people were the ascendant group and the others did not get much attention from management again for many months. It was difficult for some to take a back seat or, worse still, be caught up in the unglamorous work of repair. For some, preparing for the move had provided an opportunity to grow in their work, which now suddenly seemed truncated. Very few staff had left during the previous three years, so there had been no natural attrition. Everyone had wanted to stay in order to complete their piece of work, and be part of the family at opening. Now, for some, it was time to go.

Just a few weeks after opening, one of the three designers began looking for a new job. Three other long-term employees in senior management positions decided to leave at the same time. Each one felt a mixture of guilt and excitement, each had gained new skills and each wanted to move on to new independence and greater success. In addition, there was the expected leaving of the temporary crew of assistants and installers, as well as the two members of design and production who were involved in the previous hostilities with their supervisor. A single going-away party filled with skits, gags and serious gifts was held for the four senior people so that we would not have to exacerbate the painful goodbyes.

Some of the rest of the staff began to feel that to remain was unadventurous and cowardly. The management, wanting to be supportive of everyone, set up a system of career counseling called "Watershed." All senior employees were given time with their supervisors to explore their futures. The question was, if they wanted to stay, How could we redraft a job description that would allow for new growth? Or, if they wanted to go, How could we help them with career planning and recommendations, as a sign of our gratitude? Many people misunderstood the managers' intentions and decided that Watershed was a code word for ousting staff, cleverly disguised in the form of help. Management

unwittingly had added to the problem.

Soon, however, whoever wanted to leave did so, and a new commitment was made by those who wished to continue.

Nostalgia, No Previous History

During the entire first year, the only common daily recollections the staff shared concerned our previous location, which led to eulogizing Jamaica Plain. Only later, after we had spent a year at the Wharf, did this diminish.

Many staff believed that at the Wharf we had lost our sense of family, that things were too big and too bureaucratic. We had become, indeed, more bureaucratized in an attempt to get disrupted systems to work and in order to run a larger and more complex organization. Our full-time staff grew from 70 to 85. An important part of the change was the expansion of the middle management level. It came about rather informally and gave supervisory responsibilities to people who were not prepared for them. We created departments where there used to be individuals, often making the individual the "head" without much warning or training. These people felt unsupported as they learned and guilty if mistakes were made. Some of the new "managers" left soon afterward because they did not feel suited for the new jobs.

A significant number of staff were newcomers. The staff divided into two groups: those who had worked in the previous site, and those who had not. There was social cache in being in the old-timers crowd, and phrases like "new team" and "old team" sprang up to differentiate staffs. New staff often felt left out when old staff talked about the old site with affection. The new staff felt that they had missed the golden age.

"Things are not as good as they once were" and "In the good old days in JP . . . " colored many of our sentences. We needed to remind ourselves that JP had been full of blemishes and was not golden all the time. We needed to remember that we moved because we had to. Nevertheless, it was difficult to temper the nostalgia with more realism. People despaired that while the move was very successful for the public, life would never be as good again for the staff.

Our style in Jamaica Plain had been very informal. We had dressed casually. In moving to the Wharf, many of us had come to believe that we had to dress differently and have better "manners." While we tried to combat the prevailing notion that "company was coming" and that we should be on our best behavior, we did not altogether succeed. Our publicity brought many "famous" people to our door. Our exhibition style and our public spaces were indeed more glamorous than they had been and some believed we had to "grow up" to match them. Others believed we had become too slick, had gotten our priorities wrong and were being seduced by the "big time."

Mike and the Re-establishment of the Mission

The three division directors realized there was a widespread feeling that we had lost our way and were in danger of becoming a different kind of institution. We asked Mike to clear his calendar of all appointments and to walk around the museum, to reassert his tone and his view of the institution in a casual but continuous way. Six weeks after opening, every day for a month, Mike, wearing informal clothes, did just that. He saw all the staff in his travels, heard all the complaints and saw to small improvements in the building. Had Mike been changed by the move, or had he forgotten our goals and mission, this strategy might have exacerbated the problem. By his calm, unadorned and consistent manner, he reassured us that our confusion was temporary.

Staff Unrest

Six months after opening, although we had made many improvements to the operational systems, staff did not feel that the new museum was attending to their needs. They started to hold ad hoc meetings, intentionally excluding directors, in order to consolidate their grievances. The meetings were highly charged and attendance was determined by position in the hierarchy. Meetings were held that invited section heads; other meetings excluded them and section heads held their own meetings.

When prepared, the staff called a meeting with the directors to present their demands. They saw themselves as loyal and devoted staff who had been taken for granted and abused. There was considerable heat and anger.

Their demands were of two basic kinds:

First they wanted a personnel committee formed to which they had access and membership. They wanted the compensation system overhauled so that job categories would be created and job descriptions written that would ensure more equitable pay for equivalent work.

Second, they wanted a centrally located staff lounge.

Staff could be seen talking animatedly everywhere and conversation would often stop when a manager entered a room. Feelings ran high. Staff worried that their demands would be ignored or that retaliation would ensue for staff leaders. Instead, Mike took the position that the proposals were important and in the best interest of the entire museum. The demands were immediately acted upon and changed the priorities of the directors' work.

The Lounge and the Personnel Committee

The Personnel Committee, with elected representatives, was formed and met monthly

with all the directors. Many of the representatives were the originators of the discontent. Within the first year, the committee, together with the management group, produced a new personnel handbook that included job categories, compensation levels, rules for hiring and discipline.

We opened a staff lounge almost immediately. This lounge was never very successful and remained a continuous issue. We learned that it was not enough to allocate space, equipment or money to form a successful meeting space. Subtle ingredients were at play, such as where it was located, whether it was seen to be "owned" by one group of staff to the exclusion of another or whether food could be prepared there. However, at the time of the agitation, the management group felt that all demands were urgent and should be seen to immediately. A less than adequate lounge seemed better than no lounge at all. This was not a matter of cynicism. The management group believed that if the staff felt so assertive, they must also be right. Surprisingly, acceding to demands was not seen as weakness. It was felt that if staff and management were to become a partnership, then those matters formerly overlooked by management should be corrected by them.

The staff was skeptical but impressed that their demands were taken seriously. The matter of forging new personnel policy brought workers into continuous contact with management and allowed all involved to experience the process of joint decision making. The work of this committee went a long way toward re-establishing the museum's "culture" of open consensus-building.

My Depression

This staff agitation, while thoughtful and constructive, caused me to become personally depressed. I had worked for five years toward the move. I felt successful in accomplishing the installation and was proceeding in the effort of debugging the operations scheme. While different staff groups were under extreme stress during different stages of the move, as their supervisor, I had not let up. I was worn out, needed "mercy" and tending, and was not up to taking on another issue. While I understood that my role was to serve as the lightning rod for staff frustration and that I was not to confuse it with my personal life, there came a time when I could not do that successfully. I felt guilty and threatened by their allegations, and became defeated, lethargic and relatively unresponsive. During the next six months, I limped along doing my job only adequately until I slowly healed and returned to the optimism and enthusiasm that the job demanded.

End of the Long-Range Plan

One year later, at a conference that Mike attended, participants were asked to raise their hands if their institution had a formal long-range plan in effect. Mike raised his hand proudly and then slowly lowered it, for he realized that we had used up our plan within the first year.

During that time, we learned to run the building, re-established our internal sense of community, became more informal again (though we would never be quite as unstructured) and began to dream new dreams. We also sustained two staff deaths, four divorces, three marriages and the birth of two new babies.

On the anniversary of our first year, we awarded each other "survivor" T-shirts. The picture on the front—our logo bunny valiantly treading water in our logo gumball machine—suggested that while we often felt like we were drowning, we had come through and would go on.

Reflections and Recommendations

The literature on institutional change suggests that change is divided into two distinct categories: voluntary and involuntary. Voluntary change is preferable because it can be planned for, while involuntary change, such as natural disasters, can only be reacted to. Moving the museum would be classified as a voluntary decision and it was certainly planned for. But in truth, it was only voluntary for the senior staff and the board who made the initial decision. For the staff, the choice ultimately was either to move with us or leave. Similarly, for some of the staff, the planning felt reactive rather than proactive.

The move colored our work lives for years and permanently affected our relationships with each other and our audience. Sometimes we felt like a family uprooted because a parent had been transferred to a new and better job. All other family members understood that they were neither the valued kin nor the deciding factor, yet they had to move, leaving the familiar behind. During the transition, it would be fair to categorize each of us as taking on, in succession, all the various family roles from the dependent, often recalcitrant child to the adventurous parent.

In retrospect, we planned and collectively did many things correctly. These either averted or reduced potential difficulties. We tend to remember the gaffes most vividly, but it is useful to review the good, because our tendency to underrate our successes would present the reader with an uneven picture. I find I want to be quite "Pollyanna-ish" about it all, because the lessons that were so hard won at the time seem self-evident only in retrospect.

Participatory Decision Making and Tone

We encouraged and rewarded independent decision making in all areas. Where staff had real expertise, they were encouraged to discover and try out systems without necessarily checking with supervisors. There was genuine respect among staff and many supported each other in ways that transcended their job descriptions. The worry that independence might lead to anarchy was unfounded, and although eventually we formalized some rules, what was known in the museum as "guerilla action" or "punting" is still a rewarded part of our culture.

We encouraged bonding, ceremonies and rituals from the outset. These events were genuine expressions of the spirit and playfulness of the museum and not artificially imposed. They added pleasure to the stressful time, added to the mythology that was retold later and were a waste of neither time nor money. Rituals continue to be supported and expanded.

At the opening events, we understood the important adage "Always thank everyone," but we received unexpected rewards by trumpeting ourselves first. In the rush to acknowledge donors and trustees, staff are often forgotten or desultorily mentioned. If not appropriately recognized, staff can carry resentment forever, and they will remind you of your failing later when the going gets tough. There is always the danger that staff will receive the congratulations as pro forma, gratuitous or insincere. But staff not only deserve our appreciation, it is an important ingredient toward building staff morale.

Planning

The openness of the decision making process was the most supportive element for staff. They were included formally in planning from the beginning. Everything was revealed and all levels of hierarchy were able to contribute. I learned that sharing information was not as dangerous as I had been led to believe and making it available was a helpful, not destructive, activity. This access allowed staff to trust that decisions were not arbitrary and that their concerns would be heard and respected, if not always agreed to. The manager had to be prepared for anger when conflicting opinions inevitably made winners and losers of some staff, or if anyone was overruled. But I believe there was less anger than if the decisions had seemed capricious or uninformed.

Initially some of us wondered what relevance we had to the planning process and were skeptical about participating. Our horizon line was relatively short and the press of our work very great. We thought long-range planning was the director's job, not ours. Focusing on long-term issues struck many of us as irrelevant, or interference in the daily routine. In order to get willing compliance, management must recognize how much time

planning takes. Management should not expect staff to graft meetings onto their daily work.

Because both board and staff served on the same planning committee, each side benefited by getting to know the other better and appreciating each other's concerns. Thereafter, board members would talk knowledgeably about program issues, when in other arenas. Staff likewise had a new perspective that had been outside their own purview. The potential danger of the board and staff members bypassing the director by dealing directly with each other outside of this forum did not happen in our case, as each side was respectful of the rules.

We continued to have all levels of staff participate in planning, with ongoing benefits. Staff are members of the Personnel Committee, Health and Safety Committee and the Long-Range Policy Committee. Staff elections to the Personnel Committee have continued and the committee has allowed the staff to bring their priorities to a forum for change, review and amendment. The elected members become knowledgeable about the particular issues. They absorb the process of running groups, watch managers function first hand and understand holistically the difficulty of making a complex decision. Ultimately, they serve as conduits of information to and from the rest of the staff.

Resistance to Change

For many of us, the move involved learning new skills and information. For example, I had to learn to work with architects, curators had to examine climate control systems and designers needed to research new materials. Some of us felt exposed because we believed we should have known this information already. We became fearful that we would be found out, and we were tempted to hide our ignorance. On reflection, it is logical that part of the staff's expected resistance to change comes from their anxiety about new information. The next time around, I would acknowledge to the staff (and myself) that learning is both exciting and anxiety-provoking. I would recognize, and make allowance for, the time it takes to acquire new information. While we provided formal training in some cases, we were not systematic enough about identifying our areas of inexperience, and much learning was done unevenly and under pressure.

Group Behavior

Throughout the move I had to distinguish among the individual, the small group and the entire institution. Each was a separate entity with its own culture and its own need. I had to learn to treat each group in terms of itself.

A group, I discovered, would tolerate some behavioral deviation from individuals it

admired and would chastise or otherwise discipline those members it did not tolerate. Our institution valued some amount of eccentric behavior, and the staff made allowances—although not without some grumbling—for the creative "genius" who needed someone to clean up after him. A group whose culture was full of games accepted members who did not want to play; they could safely be watchers rather than joiners. However, if they overtly shunned the group, they would be excluded. When discipline was done within the norms of the group and within the institutional tone, I learned not to interfere. However, sometimes scapegoating happened that was very destructive and needed to be stopped.

Within the group, the jokes could be so private and the culture so seemingly exclusive that a divided society of "them and us" would form. I was torn between the enjoyment of the group's cohesiveness and the alienation the rest of us felt. Realistically, I could have only a marginal effect on this problem anyway.

While working on the installation, first with the design and production staff and then with the curators, I discovered that each staff member simultaneously belonged to a collective whole and to specialized subsets delineated by task. The subgroup often faced stress in relative isolation. The members believed that neither I, as their supervisor, nor the rest of the workers as a whole, understood or appreciated their predicament. They felt abandoned and angry. The group needed to be reassured that their concerns were real and relevant. I needed to be honest and disclose my position on every issue so they knew what I would and would not advocate. They needed to be reminded of the competing forces and the limits of my power.

The Trials of Being a Manager

When staff needed me to fix a situation that was holding up their work, they often had unrealistic expectations about what I could accomplish. Depending on the outcome, they thought either that I had unlimited power or that I was powerless. Contrary to my previous training, I learned that if I explained the cause of the limits of my power, I was not necessarily revealing weakness. Instead, I was introducing a note of realism and was asking staff to include me on their side. "We are all in this together."

However, as a manager I often had to say, "I have decided. . . . That's settled! We move on!" Many decisions were part of complex, unfolding situations rather than discreet events. Because the process was shared with the staff on an ongoing basis, they could watch managers re-examine decisions in order to weigh the pros and cons and sometimes change their minds. This led staff to believe that managers were indecisive and/or unsure. Sometimes they were right. Occasionally, as managers, we had a bout of nerves or truly did not know what to do. Sometimes, unknown to staff, new information had come in.

Thus we appeared arbitrary if we closed issues that staff continued to advocate and indecisive if issues remained open when the staff wanted us to take a position—any position. Staff felt that they could not always count on previously announced agreements, and that all solid ground might shift. These judgments by staff of the managers' performance were not unique to the move, but mirrored other management situations.

There were moments when I announced that I would no longer serve as a punching bag and that I had had enough: "I am a person too!" During the stress of the move, I learned that I as a manager and I as a person did not have to be inexorably separated. Remarkably, the staff learned to differentiate needing me as manager from supporting me as an individual.

Finally I accepted my own limits in effecting change in the staff's attitudes. Despite what I had been taught previously, people did not so much work for as with me. Being "boss" was a job, like being a carpenter. It only commanded the respect and power that I earned and others wanted to give.

Dislocation

The specter of moving engendered unrealistic optimism: people visualized spaces that were better than possible. Some staff believed that because they had attended meetings about the proposed office space, they had been promised whatever they had asked for. There was an inevitable let-down when they came face to face with reality and had to give up their fantasies. When it became clear that the new reality was truly worse than the previous location (as it was in some cases), then anger seemed an appropriate consequence. From my vantage point, the staff was very tolerant and good-humored about living in unfinished space for six subsequent years. I came to believe that there must be subtle ingredients, in addition to beauty and seeming comfort, that make for supportive office space. We must have had some but by no means all of them in our makeshift back rooms to sustain so much camaraderie.

Staff personalized their offices with a collage of treasures that became the design norm. They overcame the lack of privacy by working at home, or sometimes by commandeering closets and turning them into meeting rooms. It became clear that one essential ingredient for the staff's well-being was having a sound-proof private area where they could speak freely to each other or to a manager without embarrassment and without being watched over.

Placement of staff within offices caused friendships and partnerships to evolve. Continuous offices allowed colleagues to discover joint work just by walking by and casually chatting. It is important, therefore, when contemplating a move to understand that the proximity of staff to each other will help shape the future program of the institution.

Placement should be designated with great care.

I discovered that I did not walk through the institution on my way to my office if I did not have to. Nor did the rest of the staff. The museum can become an abstract place if it is easily bypassed by an elevator or the back stairs. Our connectedness to the institution was improved by placing our offices within the exhibition spaces. Our tempers were not.

In the beginning, we did not realize how important the placement of informal congregating areas—such as the switchboard, the mailboxes, the vending machines, the lounge and lunch place, the staff bathrooms and the sign-in and sign-out locations—were to the emotional climate. They were the most heterogeneous locations, cutting across division lines and hierarchies, and were used by all staff to see each other, exchange pleasantries and information. Once we understood this, we took great care in relocating these areas. We had to learn that confusion and disorientation were part of the settling-in process. We should have compensated for the loss of sharing by, for example, adding more frequent staff meetings and publishing in-house newsletters more often.

The most basic lesson we learned when we moved staff and equipment was that work was slowed down until new patterns were formed. In the beginning, we should have allowed extra time for finishing tasks and acknowledged staff frustration when they accomplished less.

We thought, inaccurately, that once the museum was reopened, staff numbers would go down. We found we needed extra staff for operations and for unpacking. I would recommend planning for some unexpected over-staffing in the beginning and hold a discretionary reserve account to be used to solve difficult problems. Streamlining was a good goal but it only became a reality six months later.

Recovery

We were exhausted by the time we opened. We never gave ourselves permission to rest or recover. In retrospect, I would advise giving vacations to all staff first, then allowing ample time for unpacking and setting up before beginning any new courses or workshops. It was not fair to ask staff to both unpack and begin new work simultaneously. Our tendency was to pretend that unpacking was a casual chore that could be fitted in.

If opening occurs during a busy season, I would go so far as to suggest that mandatory vacations be instituted as close to the opening as possible. Alternatively, and better still, one should open at a quiet time, shakedown in peace and give staggered though leisurely vacations before the active season comes upon you. System failure is often embarrassing and staff is better protected if shakedown is done in relative privacy.

The actual move and installation were adrenalin-packed events. There was an

inevitable let-down afterward. The director needs to understand that the staff might feel that the institution has lost its way and needs to re-establish its tone and vision. The director should be prepared to disregard new work in order to encounter all staff often and in the most casual way. This is no time to be remote or austere.

As unexpected as it was for me, it now seems perfectly logical that staff unrest occurred and focused on personnel issues, especially compensation, benefits and compensatory time. The speed of change in the new museum forced managers to make up some personnel policies as they went along. This resulted in unevenness. The staff needed clarity and uniformity that we could have provided only by thinking through the new personnel issues in advance. Even though we had revised the personnel policy before we moved, it did not accurately forecast the new situation. With the pressure of the opening period, we would not have thought to work on the personnel policy immediately after opening had the staff not demanded it. An expanded personnel policy manual that is appropriate to the new situation should be made a serious part of the moving plans.

Summary

Moving is such a huge dislocation that even if you manage to do everything right, you and your staff will still have to endure a long and difficult recovery period. Some things have to be lived through; they cannot be bypassed. Therefore it is not a reasonable goal for any manager to strive for a "traumaless" trauma.

Emotional regrouping takes at least a year. It makes sense to consolidate and rest. It is very important to enjoy your collective accomplishment and to glory in it. Yet in the midst of the turmoil, if you, as managers, have not begun to dream new dreams and to formulate new plans, you will not be ready to take your institution forward when it is again time to take on new challenges.

I believe that no matter what you do:

During the process of moving, the whole staff will go through a predictable cycle of feelings and actions. These will be:

In the beginning: excitement, unrealistic optimism, disbelief, skepticism, detachment

During the installation: helpfulness, creativity, hard work, humor, fatigue, frustration and anger

After the opening: pride, diligence, nostalgia, lethargy, disillusionment, depression, anger and agitation

People will leave, people will stay, new staff will come, the spirit will have to be rebuilt.

You can make things worse by not paying attention, by patronizing or by being punitive. Remember, all of you have moved.

To make it better you should, as manager:

Acknowledge that mood swings are to be expected and that they affect work.

Understand that dislocation is disorienting and make allowances for it.

Make new rituals and preserve some old ones, but make sure that as much humanization and personalization as possible is introduced into the new space.

Be generous with rest and vacations.

Take care of yourself. There is a limit to what you can tolerate. Announce this fact.

Acknowledge miscalculations and go about correcting them. Having to live with errors without redress furthers frustration.

Encourage peer support.

Make communication safe. It is more likely that you will be in the information loop and can take action early if you are told what is going on.

Allow as much information as possible to be available so that "above ground" is more powerful than the underground.

Separate issues from emotion, but take both seriously. The problems the staff focus on have probably been festering unattended for a long time and need to be solved positively. The feelings may be inevitable, but they are powerful and threatening for the staff. They need emotional support.

Establish tone and boundaries. Emotional anarchy is also disruptive. Work needs to go on and is itself a great healer.

Wander about, be seen and be available.

Delay new work and live off the newness of the move for as long as possible. At the same time, begin new dreams as realistically as possible so that new goals can produce measurable accomplishments and new sources of pride.

Now

I have not spoken enough about our pride in our work. We were proud then and continue to think that what we accomplished was worthwhile.

Many of the staff members who moved are still at the museum 16 years later. Within a few years after the move, staff hardly spoke of Jamaica Plain anymore. They felt as though they had always been at the Wharf, or at least for a long, indeterminate time.

In the intervening years, more staff left. In 1986, after 23 years at the museum, Michael Spock left to spearhead the reconceptualization, redesign and installation of large portions of the exhibitions at the Field Museum in Chicago. In 1987, 16 years after I had started at The Children's Museum, I left as well and moved to Washington, D.C., to participate in starting, changing, building or opening five different museums and museum-

like projects. I, who had believed that we have stamina for only one such trauma in our professional lives, went on to make a career of it.

Between 1979 and 1995, the Children's Museum has had two additional directors and suffered through a recession that was particularly severe on the East Coast. Yet through those changes and the concomitant pain, the museum and the staff within it never faltered in their commitment to each other and to the vision they had forged so long ago. The museum's staff and mission have sometimes seemed a little battered, but they have endured. To their credit, the staff of the Boston Children's Museum remains full of dreams and continues to do excellent work.

I have worked for three different and wonderful organizations during this 16-year period. While each had its own interesting ethos, I never again found the special community spirit that seemed so ordinary when I was in Boston.