Managing the Organization

Elaine Heumann Gurian

Museum colleagues were always surprised to find that we were generally workaholics with a professional polish. The informality of our culture and our hippie way of dressing belied our generally middle-class values of reliability, forthright honesty, attention to detail, and the absolute trustworthiness of keeping commitments. We opened the museum on time, came to work early, stayed late, and accounted for every penny. We carried calendars, kept meeting appointments, answered phone calls, and wrote highly successful grant proposals. By the prevailing business standards of the day, we were a very well run and efficient organization though we looked very funky.

Boston Stories
The Children's Museum as a Model for Nonprofit Leadership
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INTRODUCTION

Mike Spock

Working my way through Elaine Heumann Gurian's personal archives I came across a handwritten note to me expressing her doubts about to taking over the Visitor Center job from Drew Hyde as he was leaving the museum:

…In continuing the candid self-examination of your papers, they raise issues of concern for me about my relationship with you. How much autonomy is really being offered?...How much freedom (within job description limits) would really be made available [to] me and in turn to my staff? What do you really do with decisions or manners of work behavior that are not in your style?

Becky Corwin and Pat Steuert had warned Elaine that my reputation for fuzzing the lines of responsibility had haunted everyone well before the Director's Project (my "sabbatical" where I decamped to a temporary office in the Institute of Contemporary Art for some thinking time). And the subsequent McBer and Company intervention only confirmed that, in spite of my proclaimed conversion, boundaries were something that still needed work.

Finally, there was more than a little skepticism that I could really learn to think and behave in new ways. Was my pre-McBer ambivalence about delegating decisions and obscuring my intentions hardwired and not really amenable to change? Everyone predicted I would continue to be a handful. So Elaine's frank and revealing questions said much about the organizational challenges that would probably continue and the risks of throwing in her lot with me at The Children's Museum.

Somehow I convinced Elaine that I could manage my impulses, that she would truly be in charge, so she accepted the appointment. Within her mandate—drawn from the notion of a client-centered organization—Elaine would oversee the development and management of experiences for visiting families, school classes, and even the neighborhood kids, who hung out at the museum and insinuated themselves into the lives of the staff. But for some months after I offered her the job, Elaine thought it was useful to remind me and her crew that she was in charge of the Visitor Center, of her team, and of the decisions they would be making.

I have to add that Elaine was never anything but a great collaborator. It wasn't as if her caution signaled that she was going to be a wall-builder or create silos and not let anyone else in. Elaine was always thoughtful and generous with the other managers and their divisions, and she communicated that attitude in turn among her own people. Although the Visitor Center was her place and its team was her team, she took to heart that The Children's Museum was everyone's common purpose, and we all shared the same values and goals. This collaboration expressed itself most clearly in the weekly managers meeting where we brought our concerns—division-wide, museum-wide, and from the world at large—and moved our agenda forward. Planning, budgets, issues that were gnawing away at us—even our family crises—were fair game for the managers group.

One of a series of logo-modified tee-shirts aimed at keeping morale high, this shirt gamely broadcasts staff mindset during the museum's move to the Wharf.

Elaine ultimately acknowledged that for the most part I had stayed within my boundaries; she eventually felt quite comfortable that the Visitor Center was actually hers. And in spite of my mixed signals it turned out that everyone—staff, managers, board, and community—was actually looking to me to lead the museum as a whole. There was more than enough left over for me to do after I "gave away" the Visitor Center to Elaine, Administration to Phyl O'Connell, Community Services to Jim Zien, and the Resource Center to Pat Steuert. And they were much better at managing their turfs than I was anyway.

Everyone ended up contributing to the turnaround in leadership and management. You will see in Elaine's story that we had to invent processes and tools that allowed us, through tight but creative management, to survive and prosper in a quite unconventional organization without sacrificing our deeply held values. But Elaine, having drawn the boundaries in those initial conversations, taught me a lot of what I needed to become an effective leader in this strangely non-hierarchical organization that we were creating.

Managing the Organization

Elaine Heumann Gurian

Our challenge...will be to understand how organizations will shift from those still-pronounced functional silos to process-centric collections of cells that are self-orchestrating across functions. This is not a matrix organization—it is not about spatial structure at all. Instead it is about being able to create a collective awareness across an enterprise of the capabilities, skills, resources, and availability that exists to seize a specific opportunity.

Leadership is the single greatest counterbalance to a volatile marketplace, or economic or political threat. This is not because a good leader is a seer, but rather because a good leader will put in place those values by which a skilled group of individuals can make the right decisions in an unpredictable context.

—Thomas M. Koulopoulos and Tim Roloff
Smartsourcing: Driving Innovation and Growth through Outsourcing

The Internal Culture in the 1970s and 1980s The Children's Museum: A Reflection

In this chapter I write about the internal culture of what was known then as The Children's Museum (TCM) of Boston from 1971 to 1987 when I served as the Director of the Exhibit Center, later called the Visitor Center (the public "museum-like" portion of the museum). I am not doing this as a reminiscence; rather I am attempting to ascertain why working at The Children's Museum was more emotionally satisfying than any other position I would hold during my long career in the museum industry.

I write about that time long ago from my perspective in 2008 as a senior museum consultant who has specialized in government museums for the past ten years and who, for the previous twenty-five years, served as a salaried deputy director for four different organizations. I look backwards as a now seventy-year-old and try to recall myself as a young woman in her thirties and forties. And I remember an especially idealistic time in American history (the 1970s and 1980s) from the vantage of the first decade of the 21st century, the deeply troubling Bush era.

This might seem a nostalgic journey of possible misremembering. I am hoping it is not. I seek to uncover the particular qualities of that time in a way that might prove useful and relevant to those young museum professionals who are beginning their own careers now, as I was then.

My office in the middle of the Visitor Center, shared with team members Janet Kamien, Suzanne LeBlanc and Natalie Faldasz.

The museum that I walked into had a deeply embedded value system. The culture, with its openhearted way of doing things, functioned. A creative and industrious staff greeted me warmly. I was extremely pleased to be there. No previous work experience prepared me for this place.

Background

I joined the staff of the Boston Children's Museum on January 1, 1971, as the Director of the Visitor Center. I had just left my position as Director of Education at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) also in Boston. There, with Lennie Gottlieb, I had founded an experimental instructional supply program of industrial waste called RECYCLE. I was encouraged to bring it, and him, with me, and I did. RECYCLE remains a popular element of

...The Visitor Center [in Jamaica Plain]...looked modern, open, and airy and had the feel of a loft-like climbing structure. The space felt unfamiliar but friendly to the visitor. Wandering about in it felt adventurous to small people.

The Children's Museum to this day. When I arrived, my starting salary was $8,000 for two-thirds time.

I was married at the time and had three children—one ten-year-old boy who was severely handicapped, a seven-year-old boy in the second grade and a six-month-old daughter. As a family we had been enthusiastic users of the museum and I had worked on joint programs with The Children's Museum while at the ICA. I knew Mike Spock socially and I succeeded Drew Hyde, my previous ICA boss, into the job. It felt natural and a little incestuous.

The museum was housed in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, on the Jamaicaway. Jamaica Plain was a section of Boston that was full of stately Victorian homes, most of which were converted to institutional use. The old estate the museum occupied included a public assembly building that had been redesigned into small, exhibit-sized platforms by the architecture firm Cambridge Seven Associates. This was the Visitor Center. It had the feel of a loft-like climbing structure. It looked modern, open, and airy. The space felt unfamiliar but friendly to the visitor. Wandering about in it felt adventurous to small people.

The Visitor Center had seven or eight exhibit spaces, each about 500 square feet. One platform was used for changing exhibitions. It was transformed each month into a new exhibition for a cost of about $200 to $500. We reused as much as we could and painted it a new color. The other six spaces had ongoing themes (Native Americans, technology, physical science, grandmother's attic, natural science, arts and crafts.) They changed, too, but more slowly. And there were spaces in between these bigger spaces that gave us an opportunity to explore new and unrelated topics. Throughout the platforms were nooks and crannies in which one could hide or climb or just sit quietly. The overall feel of the museum was "Scandinavian Hippy." Our designers—Signe Hanson, Deenie Udell, and Andy Merriell—produced uniformly aesthetic, unexpected, charming, and accessible exhibit packages that felt inviting and exciting. The place was so small, so visually open and had so many circular layers that children could safely wander round and round exploring while their caregivers took their more adult and sedate time looking at things. It was difficult to get lost.

Our annual visitation was about 150,000 in 5,000 square feet of public space. In 1979, eight years after I arrived, we moved the museum to an old warehouse on the waterfront of South Boston; there we tripled our

visitation to 450,000.

The move changed the internal dynamic of the museum. As it became bigger it also became more formal. The bulk of this chapter deals with the time (1971–1979) when we all existed in Jamaica Plain. The move to the Wharf was needed for financial growth but it was disruptive to the culture we had nurtured. The staff eventually settled down at the Wharf into a climate that felt again familiar and allowed us to regain the feelings we had had before, but not without transitional trauma that took a few years to overcome.

Upon Arriving

When I arrived in 1971, Mike Spock had been director for nine years. He was well known in the Boston area and as well as in the national museum community. He had already created the great experiment of "hands-on" immersive exhibitions in 1964. He had planned, executed and opened the new Visitor Center in 1968. He had organized The Children's Museum into three distinct branches: Visitor Center, Community Services, and Teacher Services. The multi-media MATCh Kits project, which revolutionized school learning, had been completed and kits were circulating. The success of all these experiments had already made some powers in the museum and educational communities take notice. There were many families and classrooms of students who were already enthusiastically using the Visitor Center.

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Mike's Template for Hiring

Part of Mike's success came from his penchant for hiring gifted, quirky people who were relative novices in their professional accomplishments though not necessarily young in age or experience elsewhere. Most of us had never had a chance to shine before, and our self-confidence was not fully formed. He delighted in the rough and tumble of vigorous discussion, and he was never committed to just one route to get to a desired outcome. He had a big vision but left implementation to others. As long as the institution progressed in the right direction, he was happy to have his staff act independently. He was even-handed, even-tempered, and modest. He liked strong, opinionated people as long as they were civil to each other and fully professional. He did not like intransigence. All the people who worked for him had to be willing to lose an argument gracefully and embrace the direction decided upon after a full and fair hearing. I fit exactly into that template.

Many of us had considered ourselves outsiders in our childhoods. Many were unaccustomed to succeeding, to being praised, to being encouraged to try new things. Part of my team (myself included) referred to themselves as "orphans" though we all had been raised by parents. But we were used to being thought of as odd, misfits, and nothing had prepared us to be in an environment where we were liked for who we were and where encouragement was part of the supervision.

Every supervisor hired people using the same emotional profiles Mike used. New hires were selected for optimism, inventiveness, passion, and a kind of fearlessness, not recklessness. Most were not hired because of their deep professional experience. While they had done good work in a number of arenas, their reputations did not precede them. All managers took pleasure in watching their staff grow, acquire new skills, and become more self-confident. Most importantly, every single person employed at the museum believed that they could learn something useful from each other.

Betsy Allen's Scarecrow Making workshop included members of the Chin-Gillespie family: Eleanor Chin, left, and Kevin Gillespie, center, along with friends and helpers, both human and animal.

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There were a few people who had been at the museum a very long time and were much older than the majority of the staff. These five or six "old timers" were all dedicated to the adventure of the new. They were models of good sense and cheerfulness, and gave some ballast to the exuberance of youth. I never heard "we don't do it that way" from any of them. They were like good "Aunties" and "Uncles."

Our backgrounds were very different from one another.

Accompanying the Orange Apron floor staff of 1975 are Visitor Center team members Natalie Faldasz, back row left; Audrey Goldstein, back row right; Janet Kamien, front row, second from right; Suzanne LeBlanc, front row, far right; and Elaine Heumann Guruan directly behind her. Floor staff included (not all pictured here) Barbara Bernstein, Mary Beth Cahill, Cathy Coates, Dorothea Copeck, Alexia Dorsynski, Richard Dubler, Gerry Dunham, Linda Gomes, Andy Hardocker, Maureen Hickey, Clay Keller, Sandy Kranes, Susan Lockwood, John McConnell, Sue Porter, Sandy Rosenberg, Michael Sheff, Jessican Skoher, Riva Spear, Penny Stohn, Alan Wren.

Some folks were married, some single, some divorced, some gay. We represented a mix of cultures and racial backgrounds, and had been raised in different geographic locations. Some were immigrants, some first generation, and some came from blue-blooded founding families. We originated from different economic classes and from both urban and rural settings. Our schooling was different. Many had gone to public school while a fair number were private school educated. Some (including Mike and me) had struggled in school, though almost all had university degrees of some level.

Given how different we were from each other, one would have thought we held diverse world-views but it turned out not to be so. The staff was mostly adults in their twenties and thirties, mostly women, mostly parents, and mostly left wing politically. More often than not, each person was an activist working in some cause, and we volunteered at a wide range of organizations. The men and women alike were devoted to ecology, feminism, peace, disarmament, civil rights, and economic, gender, and homosexual equity.

The majority of the staff also shared similar definitions of work, humor, politics, children, aesthetics, adventure, and equality. Because we shared similar values we did not have to overtly articulate our basic assumptions to each other. Much of our work was carried on in a world of unspoken, internalized understandings. "It doesn't feel like us"—a mantra often used—was broadly understood to mean the idea under discussion should be rejected because it would violate some important shared value.

Our work environment was unlike most of the "real world" where different world-views operated simultaneously and often antagonistically. I have often thought that our aspiration for a world of peaceful integration in the face of diversity was at variance with our own internal homogeneity of outlook. We did not have to integrate much of anything. I believe that we succeeded because we were fundamentally much alike despite our diverse histories. Our accomplishments and our limitations might have come from that fact.

The World Around Us

The 1960s gave rise to the commune, flower children, recreational drug use, civil rights, anti-nuclear activism, and sexual freedom. At The Children's Museum, we were almost universally against the Vietnam War and for nuclear disarmament. We were interested in the open school philosophy practiced in such places as Summerhill and the Parkway Project but most of us sent our children to somewhat more traditional schools. Amazingly, while we were living during the new drug age—and most of us smoked cigarettes and drank alcohol in public—what-

ever personal drug use was going on was not part of our shared internal culture.

While the institution we served had its own form of bureaucracy, we would have told anyone that we were philosophically anti-hierarchical and anti-establishment. Outsiders considered The Children's Museum to be on the counter-culture fringe of Boston's cultural establishments.

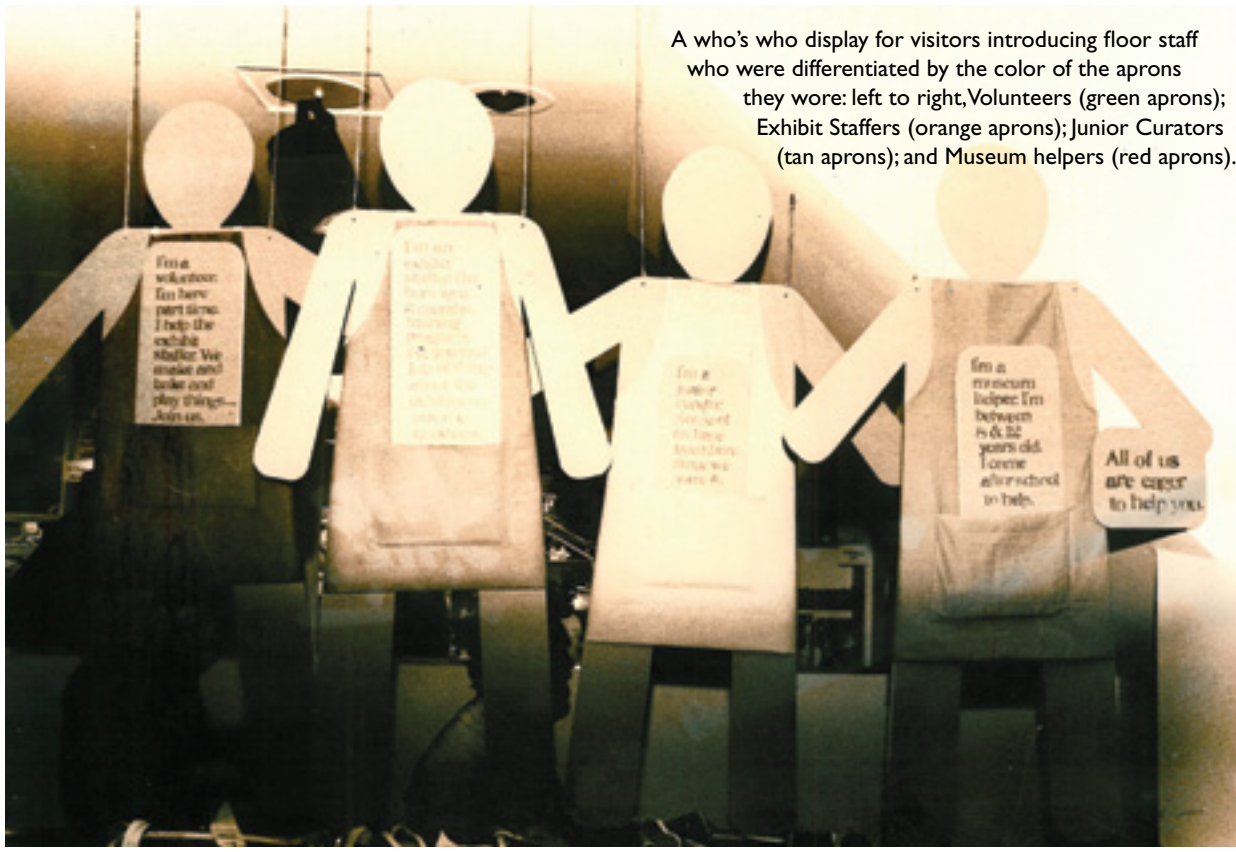
On-staff photographer Jerry Berndt demonstrating the banana trick he developed for a flip book.

Of all the many philosophical ideologies that were current at the time, we chose to embed the ethos of the equitable commune within our institutional culture. We operated according to the norms common to a large family or an operating community of self-selected companions. The staff believed that each had responsibility for the whole group and for the well-being of every individual in it, whether we liked the person or not. Catastrophic illness or accident affecting one staff member was the concern of the whole. Some pitched in to help at work and some helped out at home. Others filled in behind them. One was granted time off without penalty for helping someone else in an emergency. Interestingly, I can't remember anyone ever abusing this.

The welfare of the family unit was embedded in the workday. Supervisors allowed staff to take leave to attend their children's "third-grade violin concerts" without affecting official vacation time providing that they got coverage and made plans in advance. Parents could bring children to work if they were sick or on school vacation. Babies could have a crib in the office if they were not overly disruptive. During vacation weeks when we all had to work, we would pay to have babysitters supervise our collective children in the museum and we prepared our meeting rooms for them to play in. Mothers occasionally nursed their babies at meetings without raising any comment.

There was an intentional blurring of work and personal life and both were the concern of the whole without being "too nosey." We found it natural to have friendships and, infrequently, romances with our workmates. It was totally acceptable to socialize with each other outside of the work place. We had a pro-nepotism policy of hiring married and unmarried partners, siblings, and children who were learning the trades of their parents.

This ethos did not reduce the quality of the work. We believed that it enhanced it. Everyone expected work to be of a high quality and to be delivered on time and on budget. It most often was. Methods of supervision, appraisal, and evaluation were created that seemed thorough and fair. While we had a personnel policy that made it impossible for a related family member to supervise another, we thought we were like circus families



A who's who display for visitors introducing floor staff who were differentiated by the color of the aprons they wore: left to right, Volunteers (green aprons); Exhibit Staffers (orange aprons); Junior Curators (tan aprons); and Museum helpers (red aprons).

where it was natural to grow up within the organization.

Remembering

Before this journey into remembering makes me misty-eyed, I want to point out that life was never perfect at The Children's Museum. We argued. Some individuals carried on long-standing feuds. We were organized into divisions and departments, each of which thought the other units had more access to privilege than they did. There were jealousies and rumors. There were sad deaths and divorces. Sometimes our most vulnerable young people were incarcerated. Wages were low even when compared to similar places. Given the activism of the times, it was not surprising that once in a great while groups organized, agitated for something, and threatened to walk out if they felt unfairly treated.

Yet, every morning as tired (and sometimes angry at each other) as we were, we arrived collectively thinking that we were privileged to be creating useful work within a functioning team. We had a spirit of cohesion, of belonging. We were proud and pleased to work together and of the work we created. We believed in that adage "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." One of my missions in writing this is to understand finally what "belonging" meant in that context, how it was derived, and why it felt so good and important.

Museum Precedent

In the 1970s, the museum was considered "sweet if inconsequential" by the Boston cultural elite and not to be taken too seriously by "prestigious" museums in the area. We found complimentary institutional siblings elsewhere: the staffs of the Exploratorium® in San Francisco and the Barnsdall Junior Art Center in Los Angeles. Three institutions, using different subject matter, were engaging in similar experiments at the same time.

The broad professional museum community was equally divided about the work we were doing. Their opinions ranged from passionate detractors to equally ardent supporters. They considered us to be some combination of precedent setting, beyond the pale, irrelevant, and inspiring. Many thought of us as a "swell" indoor playground and not a museum at all.

Social Service

Our activities combined regular museum programs with those generally found in social service organizations. Since we concentrated on providing useful service to our client base—children and their caregivers, with special emphasis on underserved audiences—when we observed a need we could fill, we did not stop to contemplate its applicability to museum standards. For example, before I came, staff had noticed that there were very few opportunities for young adolescents who were acting out to do socially valued work. Local kids would sometimes sneak into the museum. We found that if we caught them and put them to work, they would return day after day. So we created a junior staffing program that included "kids at risk" who worked in our institution. We hired a psychiatrist who came once a week to help our own staff manage the adolescents who worked for us.

We created a special visitation program for individuals with handicaps. We focused on the most compromised sector, which included citizens who rarely visited anywhere. We closed the Visitor Center one morning a week to all but thirty of these citizens and staffed it with one-on-one helpers who included local college kids majoring in special education. After each of these sessions, we held a one-hour supervisory meeting for all the helpers. Additionally we taught all floor staff the rudimentary fundamentals of American Sign Language. And we created an advisory committee of advocates in the community of people with disabilities to help us make our new building accessible.

At the same time, having noticed that the Visitor

Floor Staff Learn and Use ASL

Above, reflecting the museum ethos of inclusivity and a focus on serving audiences with all kinds of special needs, all floor staff were trained in the rudimentary American Sign Language (ASL). Below, floor staff member puts her training to work with a young visitor.

Center was becoming an indoor playground for toddlers, Jeri Robinson created the remarkable preschool *Playspace,* which resulted in additional programs, i.e., working with single parents, teen parents and creating similar play spaces in detention centers. Copies began to spring up all over—in airports, train stations and other museums. They filled an important and growing need.

We chose exhibit topics that intentionally helped create dialogue between generations on subjects considered taboo for the young child. We presented exhibitions on death, handicapping conditions, homeless abandoned children, and atypical families (which included homosexual parents).

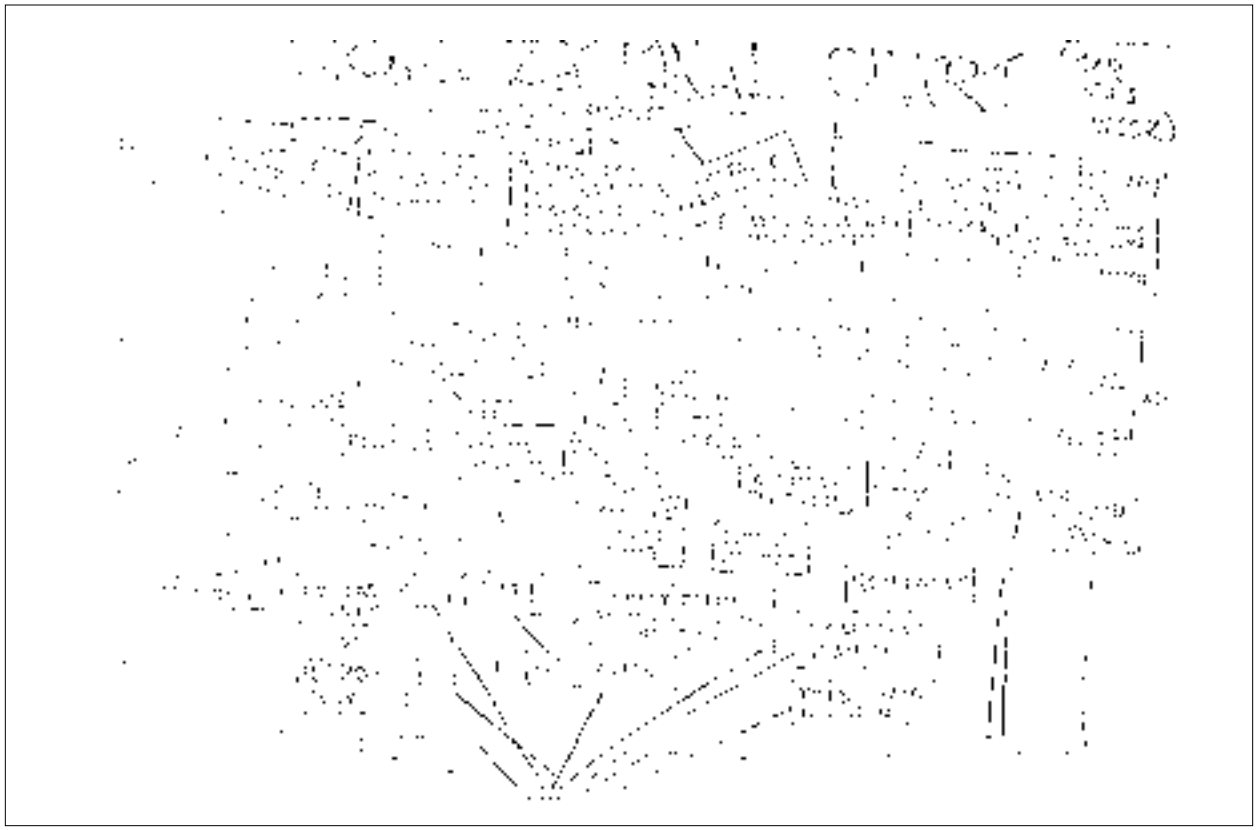
The Children's Museum's senior staff almost never debated whether these programs were appropriate. It was only when outside museum professionals spoke about appropriate or inappropriate boundaries that we understood that many museum professionals deemed some of our work to be the responsibility of other, unrelated systems. We discovered we had more in common with the community museum movement then we did with object-centered museums. Since we were not too interested in thinking about ourselves exclusively as a museum, none of these boundary conversations ever mattered very much to us.

Though The Children's Museums was an old institution that started in 1913 and preserved and sometimes displayed collections of value, most of the staff hired under Mike Spock's directorship had never worked in a museum before and were basically uninterested in having traditional museum practice guide our work. We remained generally unconcerned about our professional reputation within the museum community. We had all we could do with day-to-day operations and planning new work.

Fame

As the '70s melded into the '80s, we became more and more well known. First Ladies of foreign countries often arrived. Some staff members began to spend quite a bit of time helping train staff in other institutions that wanted to emulate our work. There were more than a 100 new children's museums started during this decade both in the United States and abroad. These were mostly combined copies of the Exploratorium and us.

After being an object of study within the museum community for many years, we began to strategically use our notoriety to our own advantage. Mike and I intentionally became more prominent in museum associations because we felt it enhanced the museum's reputation; others joined us as elected officials. We made the case that The Children's Museum had become a national and international standard-bearer and change agent. Our proposals stated that we deserved to be funded not only because of the work we did but because it would change the way others did their work as well. Being nationally and internationally known made fundraising easier from federal and foundation sources. Our own hometown of Boston began to take us more seriously. Our press clip-



This chart appeared in offices in the early '80s, capturing the spirit of our recent growth spurt.

ping allowed us entrée to folks we hadn't been able to approach before.

Yet the "fame" didn't change our way of thinking. We didn't become more cautious nor did we become calculatedly experimental. We had been together for such a long time (there was very little staff turnover) that we continued to work with our internal systems. We understood that what we had done in the past had created our reputation and we should continue on our way.

A meeting with my floor staff at the Wharf's new "sit-around" (early '80s). Staff, characterized by a mix of unorthdox personal styles, actively participated in regular meetings. The meetings, which also appeared to be very informal, were actually run using very clear guidelines that promoted inclusivity, efficiency, transparency, and productivity.

Despite this understanding of fame in the outside world, I believe that it was our general lack of self-consciousness internally that remained an essential ingredient in our work. On the other hand, when the museum moved to the Wharf in 1979, we did become self-conscious and it took many years to feel comfortable with ourselves again.

When I left The Children's Museum in 1987 to work in other more "prestigious" museums, I found it was their conscious concern for their reputation that often got in their way. At other museums, the phrase "It doesn't feel like us" meant the activity in question might jeopardize their standing in society, whereas at The Children's Museum that phrase meant it was in violation of our internalized values.

Work Ethic

Museum colleagues were always surprised to find that we were generally workaholics with a professional polish. The informality of our culture and our hippie way of dressing belied our generally middle-class values of reliability, forthright honesty, attention to detail, and the absolute trustworthiness of keeping commitments. We opened the museum on time, came to work early, stayed late, and accounted for every penny. We carried calendars, kept meeting appointments, answered phone calls, and wrote highly successful grant proposals. By the prevailing business standards of the day, we were a very well run and efficient organization though we looked very funky.

Hierarchy

The museum had the same pyramidal structure as most for-profit organizations of the time, rather than the flattened hierarchy favored by more left-wing organizations. It was organized in departments with department heads (managers), divisions with division heads (directors), and was led by the director of the museum (Mike Spock).

We had, I think, a particular view of hierarchy that did not accord the managers any additional respect or privilege save a modest increase in salary. The staff at the museum believed in the importance and relevance of every job regardless of its place in the hierarchy. We believed that each job had special expertise and a kind of leadership within its own sphere.

The notion of hierarchy was supported by most because it allowed for civil decision-making. However contrary to most corporate work places where leaders were accorded special deference, at The Children's Museum leadership was considered a job like any other. There was a belief that everyone should be making decisions in their own arena and taking responsibility for them.

Most staff believed that collective solutions were better and more creative then thinking through the problem alone. Group effort was to be admired and enjoyed. Personal eccentricity was tolerated and even applauded, but not if the individuals chose isolation and did not participate, or if they were too aggressive in a group and not respectful of others' input.

Recalcitrance, passive-aggression and delay, the mighty weapons of the no-sayers in many museums of the time, had no traction at The Children's Museum. If you tried to halt progress, the team would move on without you.

By and large people wanted decisions; and they wanted to get on with it. Staff would often complain about the slowness of the process but almost never about the arbitrariness of it. The path to decision-making was expected to be inclusive and transparent. There were very few secrets. The only exception anyone made was the respect accorded to the privacy of personal lives.

If the decisions or product someone had made proved to be flawed, there were almost never any recriminations. Mistakes were considered part of our learning experience in uncharted territory and things to be fixed and put right.

Meetings

In order to get our collective work done, we went to meetings and meetings upon meetings. Yet, meetings were almost never vague nor did they end without a plan

of action. There was an agenda (which anyone could add to), discussion, allocation of responsibility, and agreed on next steps. The discussion was often timed. The meetings began and ended almost on time, and the next steps gave individuals directions for their work.

We all knew how to run meetings. They all followed a pattern that we learned from Mike. He used flip charts and easels, which we then all adopted. Meetings were memorialized by writing the proceedings on big flip charts, pages of which were then posted around the room. Any attendee could add things to the flip charts if they thought something important was left out or inaccurately recorded. The recorder had no special privilege and was not a controlling presence. Recording was just a way to allow us all to see what was happening. When the meeting notes were typed up afterward, we would discover they didn't make a lot of sense, so we learned that what we wanted to remember was only the decisions and their respective next steps.

At home in the Congress Street D&P Department, in a portrait by Aylette Jenness. Back row, from left: David Atherton, Dan Spock, John Spalvins; middle row, from left, Dave Bubier, Linda Koegel, Sing Hanson; front row, from left, Hyla Skudder, Louise Outler, Tom Merrill, Kate Loomis, and dog Perry.

We all knew the open rules of brainstorming and would gaily proceed to offer ideas without fear of criticism. However, contrary to many museums where I would subsequently work, our brainstorming was a finite activity followed by priority setting, agreement on solutions, and then getting the work done.

Everyone knew that after group input, someone very specific had to decide the outcome fairly and then become responsible for its implementation. At every meeting, there was an agreed leader who set the agenda, invited input, kept time, moved the process along, and summarized at the end. The meeting leader was generally the person who had the most at stake at that particular meeting and was not chosen by their position in the museum. Thus, even though I was the director of the Visitor Center, I was frequently just a meeting member with no special privilege.

Meetings would end with summaries in which the leader would accept responsibility, announce decisions, if any, and assign next steps with completion dates. Sometimes implementation would take minutes, and sometimes months, depending on how many people the outcome could affect and the seriousness of the issue. Once a decision was reached, the decision maker was expected to share it with all who had been interested. The thinking behind the decision was to be explained and the reason for discarding other options was to be made known. The process happened naturally and was hardly as formal as this writing makes it sound.

Leaders invited whomever they wished to the meetings so participants often crossed divisions or job descriptions. People were often invited for their good sense rather than their expertise. Yet there were also standing meetings that allowed all members of the same tier to meet with their supervisor on a regular basis.

On matters of institutional importance, open gathering of input was expected. Everyone was encouraged to offer an opinion on any matter that interested them. Meeting rooms were often crowded with people. Sometimes there was a feeling of déjà vu because we felt we had already covered that ground. We were often too painstaking. When big-ticket items came up—budget planning, construction and space allocations, for example—senior managers would often share their excruciatingly slow process with staff. On the one hand, staff was pleased to be included but on the other, staff often felt we were ditherers. But it was also understood that intentional withholding of information for power or control was not tolerated by anyone.

There was a complementary set of regularly scheduled meetings that allowed for sharing of individual problems and feedback. People met routinely by job description. Content managers (developers), for example, met weekly. The Visitor Services staff met daily for thirty minutes prior to opening the museum. Visitor Center staff met weekly with me, and the entire staff met monthly with Mike.

Given that staff involved with individual projects were also holding scheduled meetings in addition to a whole other separate set of issue-based meetings, it certainly was a meeting culture. The good part was that information was flowing in all directions. Most meetings were mercifully short, packed with information, good jokes, and often food. They were uniformly well run. Issues raised that required more study were isolated and rescheduled. With the exception of the senior managers' meeting that took half a day each week, most sessions

were fast moving.

It was believed by all that decisions once made would not be reopened except in the rarest of instances. Grousing after the fact, which happened in good measure, was not expected to produce change, nor was wandering slyly into the decision maker's office at all helpful. Going around the decision maker to a higher level supervisor would get the complainer sent back to the decision maker for further discussion. There were no successful side routes or end runs.

Issues were reopened only if new, important, and contradictory facts were discovered or if the collective group felt the decision in question was grossly unfair and they were prepared to take collective action. This kind of serious rethinking happened about once a year. Managers did not think of themselves as infallible. It was believed by the most senior managers that if "so many people were upset, they must be right." The directors in question would publicly announce that they had obviously made a stupid decision and would reconsider it.

This process was extremely different from most other museums for which I subsequently consulted. Their decisions were endlessly reopened or secretly renegotiated. Meetings were often pointless and vague. I encountered a widespread belief that consensus building meant unanimity, which of course was never reached. In these unnamed places, it was assumed that the inconclusive agenda-less meetings were to be considered the work at hand.

Borrowing

At The Children's Museum many of us found management processes fascinating. Even though, for example, we all knew how to conduct meetings, we were interested in running them better. We studied each other's styles and adopted those we liked best. We read management literature and brought systems back to try out. We all liked process and learning new things. We borrowed systems from for-profit and not-for-profit places alike. We thought "borrowing" ideas, systems and strategies was fair game. People came back from trips to tell of new ways of doing things. We would try them out.

Since many professionals came to see how we did things, we thought imitation was indeed flattering. We were generous with our time and gave most folks access to our documents and our strategies. (The only exception was we didn't help those who wished to create for-profit copies in order to put us out of business.) We believed that since we had borrowed generously, we should help others do the same.

The Individual Solutions

Given our meeting culture, it seems an oxymoron to say that independent decision-making was expected and encouraged. It was understood that every person worked within a framework of aligned institutional values and it was assumed that one could and should make decisions that fit entirely within his/her job description. All were encouraged to take on as much as they felt comfortable with without prior permission. Checking in with one's

T-Shirts | A Deconstruction

1.

2.

3.

Clues to key moments in the history of The Children's Museum from 1960-1990 can be found in a series of t-shirts designed and worn by staff.

1. 1980: The museum's softball team t-shirt.
2. 1980s: With booming attendance, we identified, bunny-style, with the hot 1980s Massachusettts slogan.
3. 1986: We celebrated a temporary departure from issues-based exhibits with a just-for-fun venture.

supervisor led to further encouragement. Timidity was not a cultural value. However, there were unspoken limits that sometimes got violated and then we would need to get someone to slow down.

There was almost no prescribed way of doing anything. We believed in and often quoted from Howard Gardner's book on multiple intelligences. Many routes led to getting things done and all were accorded respect. It was the act of accomplishing that had value, and all methodology was fair game and potentially interesting.

That said, work was done within a framework of parameters. If you were in a service-providing category (phone answering, floor manager, front of house staff, etc.), you were expected to show up at a regular time. Everyone was expected to be friendly when delivering service, yet what friendliness meant might be more expansive for some and subtler for others. We had systems of supportive training but did not demand uniformity.

It was expected that if individual decisions impinged on others' work, it would be noticed and brought back to the group. Since there was a system of weekly review at every level, individuals could triumphantly bring back solutions they had invented and share what they had crafted with others.

Staff was encouraged to ask others for help. If you didn't spell well and someone else did, then having them do the spelling was just fine. There was no internal proprietary information, and even individual authorship was seen as the result of group effort.

There was recognition of talents that had nothing to do with job description or hierarchy. So, asking the Recycle truck driver, Jim Roher a question about music was expected because it was known that he was a good musician, and inviting him to an exhibition team on musical instruments would also be expected.

A cup of technicians (R&D Team members) working on a large coffee mug for the Giant's Desktop, ca. 1979, in the Jamaica Plain yard: from left, Juris Ozols, Wendy Wilson, Agnes deBethune, Andy Merriell, Ed Glisson, Angela Battista, John Spalvins; Sing Hanson (looking through cup handle) and Jane Torchiana (sitting in front).

Recognition

Despite the enormously supportive and egalitarian work environment, we were not good enough in giving credit. Since we didn't pay well and worked as a collective, managers were inconsistent about publicly shining lights on individual achievement. We learned to do this slowly and needed to be reminded often.

We began to create amusing recognition ceremonies (though not often enough). We publicly awarded roses at every opening to every participant in the exhibition pro-

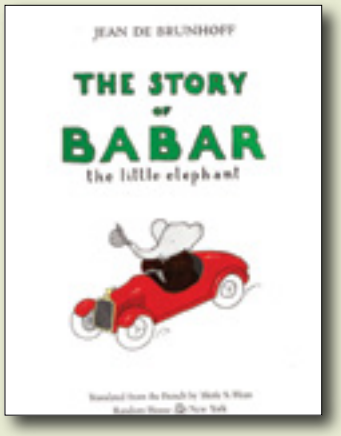
4. 1983: We signal the end of our bunny image and the search for a new logo.

5. 1979: The sun logo setting on our JP home when we closed in April. This shirt was awarded to floor staff who stuck it out in JP while the rest of us moved downtown. The '79–'80 survivor shirt (see intro) soon followed for all staff.

6. 1985: We looked forward to real offices and classrooms after years of "camping out" in unfinished warehouse spaces.

Jeri & Babar

In 1982, the museum hosted a very successful traveling exhibit, *The Art of the Muppets,* in the Visitor Center. We were new to the world of traveling exhibits, and this one cost a lot. It was a very big financial risk, but we made the case to the board that the popularity of these characters among children and families would drive attendance. Initially, Muppets creator Jim Henson did not want the exhibit to go to a children's museum. He was more interested in the Muppets' appeal to adult audiences, but eventually he relented. The exhibit was unbelievably successful, a true blockbuster. We made the money back and then some. The profit was put into a special account earmarked for entrepreneurship.



A couple years later, Laurent de Brunhoff, the son of the very popular Babar author, Jean de Brunhoff, offered the museum an exhibit of his father's original drawings. Flush with the success of *The Muppets,* we signed a contract immediately. Although this was an "art only" exhibit, we thought we could "children's museum-ize" it and make it align with our hands-on museum model. Babar was much-beloved and hugely popular. All of our children had read the books.

But Jeri Robinson came to us and said we couldn't do it. The pictures of black people in the stories were racist and stereotypical. Yes, we countered, but they were done in a different time. If you look at a lot of older children's classics, they're full of racism, sexism, etc. A heated museum-wide discussion ensued. We worried that, if we presented the exhibit, the black community would hate it, agitate against it, and we could be destroying all the credibility we'd worked so hard to build. Other museums had gotten into trouble with exhibitions about Africa recently. *Into the Heart of Africa,* presented by the Royal Ontario Museum, was lambasted as racist and shut down by the black community.

But I'd signed a contract. Passionate opinions, from pro to con, ranged across the museum. And, unusual for me, I didn't feel strongly one way or the other. It was the process that fascinated me. The conversation was about negotiation and compromise. How about if we used the exhibit as a teaching tool? What if we used it to teach reading or about the author's personal points of view or the history of racism in children's literature? But Jeri was adamant: if we showed racist drawings, they would make indelible pictures on young kids' minds. Mike and the board had agreed that it probably would be fine to present some version of the Babar exhibit, but they left the decision up to me.

I went home that night and gave it some thought and decided to cancel it. While I didn't agree that Babar was entirely objectionable, I thought about the risk of losing everything we had worked for in the community. Why ask for trouble? We worked hard to make the museum strong. It turns out the contract was not that hard to break and there was no financial penalty. And the deBrunhoff family wasn't all that crazy about "children's museum-izing" the exhibit anyway.

But the story continued. In 1986 I left the museum and taught at the Getty's MMI program, a training camp for rising museum professionals. They used the case study method, similar to methods used at Harvard Business School. I used the Babar story as a case study in decision-making. Students assumed the roles of Jeri, Elaine, Mike, the board, etc. They teased big questions out of it: What is censorship? What are the roles of leaders? In the end I told them about my real-life decision, and the class erupted. They were outraged. Thought this was the worst decision I could have made. I had pandered to the "tyranny of the minority." I had not protected artistic integrity. Since these were mostly art museum people, it felt like I'd violated some unfamiliar-to-me code.

I explained that at The Children's Museum, there were passionate opinions pro and con, and we listened respectfully to every one of them. We loved Babar, but we loved and respected Jeri, too. In the end, we realized we had to decide in a way that made us all feel right about it. We had to listen to our audiences—all of them.

Now, as a consultant, I work with a lot of museum directors who wish to respect the views of affected minority community members and don't believe that decisions in their favor represent the "tyranny of the minority," but who also don't want to cave into decisions that smell like censorship. I tell them, you can make any decisions you want, but a museum is a protected space and need not accept all artistic creations that offend members of the audience; it's your choice.

cess. We gave a surprise tee shirt annually to all who had survived the year in a formal ceremony with a receiving line complete with hugs and kisses. I wrote a Valentine that included a trinket to every staff member in my division, and came to find them accumulating on peoples' desks as a reminder of their longevity.

We learned to share royalties fifty-fifty with our authors, and we acknowledged the authorship of each exhibition by listing all who had worked on it. Yet there was never enough appreciation consistently expressed; people who worked so hard got cross when they felt unrecognized and under-appreciated. We never got this exactly right.

Personnel Policy

We thought everyone should grow in their jobs, seek and receive new and challenging work, and advocate for themselves. We actively preferred internal promotion over outside hire. Once a year, directors interviewed everyone in their charge and, together with other managers, created new job descriptions that accommodated growth—though this growth was not often enough reflected in additional compensation.

We fired people immediately for egregious behavior—theft, abuse, violence—although this happened rarely. We had a process of supervision for less than acceptable work that could result in staff departure. We also had an appeals system to allow staff members in question to air their grievances.

We counseled people to leave when they seemed to have used up their interests and were flagging in enthusiasm. We thought it was okay to get tired of your job and come to the end of it. We had a number of jobs that were considered time-limited and we told the prospective employees that before they began. We did not allow floor staff to stay more than six months unless they were promoted into other jobs in the museum. Each year we had a graduation ceremony for about fifteen to thirty Visitor Services staff who often went on to important positions in other museums. Before they graduated, we trained them in resume writing. They knew they could always come back to us for recommendations. We helped people get new jobs elsewhere when they wished to try new experiences or had to move. Many of our former staff became the foundations of other organizations. We gloried in the advance of former colleagues. Many children's museum directors and senior staff at other museums got their start in our entry-level Visitor Services department.

Shorthand Language

We invented lingo that was shorthand for agreed-upon concepts. "Green and leafy" meant boring. "A bottle of wine" meant that something too costly and outside the budget scope was being sneaked into the project with a mutual wink all around. "Bunnies and duckies" was a disparaging term for anything that was too cute and cloying. There were other terms less repeatable and even more colorful. Staff members Sing Hanson and Janet Kamien, in particular, created wonderful turns of phrase that were much appreciated, and all soon adopted their unique language. The use of private language, like slang and patois everywhere, had the quality of bonding us into a private group. (See In-House Glossary at the end of this chapter for more terms.)

Managers' Meeting

As director of the Visitor Center, my job involved proposing an overall vision for my team, advocating for my division with other division directors, and making the decisions no one else on my team wanted to make. This included working jointly with division directors and Mike in creating the priorities of the institution and then promulgating them both internally and to the outside world. Staff often told me how glad they were that they did not have my job, that they liked their own much better. I, however, loved my job and could not believe that I was being paid to have so much pleasure.

Every Monday afternoon I went to managers' meeting with Mike, Phyl O'Connell (Administration) Pat Steuert (School and Education Services), and Jim Zien (Community Services). These policy-setting meetings took on the most difficult museum issues: budget development, grant allocation, staffing, personnel policy, relationships with community and board, and physical space development and allocation. Every member of the group could add to the agenda, which was the first order of business. Next, the agenda was divided by time so that all things could be covered. All participants believed they would get an even hearing, that the others in the room were worthy of respect, and that Mike would listen with care. Unbelievably, votes were never taken. A topic was discussed (sometimes it felt endless) until the whole group was in agreement. Utterance of the phrase "It doesn't feel like us" could immediately defeat a proposed solution on the table. Accordingly, that phrase was seldom uttered and when it was, it was done with care, because we all knew and had internalized the boundaries of our institution. We were not about to violate the integrity of our work.

The meetings were often heated but talk was never rude or accusatory. The four managers were not of similar personalities and had different cultural backgrounds. While we became trusted colleagues and friends through the process of working together, we probably would not have met each other in the outside world. But we knew that each cared for the betterment of The Children's Museum and the clients we served, and we all worked equally hard.

I was the most territorial, the most fearful and the most aggressive of the group. I protected my staff and

my turf fiercely. Yet the others were no slouches in the patrolling of their own boundaries; they just had better etiquette in doing it. I always felt that I was the most ill-mannered and the most outspoken, as befitted my background as a New York City Jew and daughter of German-Jewish immigrants. Whatever manners I subsequently had, I acquired slowly at The Children's Museum. They served me in good stead for the rest of my working career when I chose to use them.

In 1984, staff and board gathered for a weekend at AYH Friendly Crossroads. Back row, left to right: Sue Jackson, AYH hostess, Kyra Montagu, Phyl O'Connell, Elvira Growdon, Judy Flam, David Burnham, Bernie Zubrowski, Joan Lester, Jeri Robinson, Mike Spock, Evelyn Berman, Bill Wiseman, Sylvia Sawin, Chet Pierce, Dottie Merrill, Aylette Jenness, Jeptha Wade, Elaine Heumann Gurian. Standing against rail, left to right: AYH host, Vas Prabhu, Suzanne LeBlanc, Janet Kamien, Betsy Allen. Front row, sitting, left to right: Eleanor Chin, Pat Steuert, Dennis Kane, Anna Cross, (unidentifed), Sing Hanson, Chris Sullivan.

We conducted an annual review of institution-wide content, organizational structures, mission statement, and board relationships. We also spent considerable time on moving the museum into new spaces, supporting each others' personal work lives and aspirations, and of course, the budget with all its ramifications.

The managers' meeting began to take up the prospective annual budget six months before it was due to come before the board. It was an excruciating process that required creating a budget for your division, revealing it to each other, calculating the shortfall, hoping that managers would allow for some slack, bringing some more earned income to the table, estimating percentages of soft money, and revising the budget over and over until it was balanced. Then we would proceed to writing grant applications, creating a list of fund-raising possibilities that was larger than we could manage, and finally putting those possibilities in a priority order for which to then write targeted "walking papers" and budgets.

"The Thread Salesmen"

We had elaborate fundraising systems. There were agonizing meetings where cherished hopes were postponed for yet another year. Twice a year a team went to Washington, DC, and called on every possible federal funder to suss out every funding opportunity and their particular slants. We went to New York at least once a year and called on every possible foundation to do the same and float some new ideas. People made trips to Kellogg and Kresge at critical times. We carried with us kits of walking papers, of "show and tell," and "leave behinds." We gave a big party annually at the Tabard Inn in Washington for all the workers in federal giving programs and museum associations. We were often told that the Washington attendees at these events saw each other at no other time. Because we were frugal we often catered these parties from local supermarkets. We thought of ourselves as "thread salesman" and gave ourselves solace that sometimes people bought green and sometimes purple thread, so we needed to have all colors at the ready in case they wished to see them.

New Ideas

Acquiring new ideas for new directions was an ongoing process. Outsiders often suggested new ideas, assuming that going from idea to product was an easy process. The staff knew otherwise. New ideas needed to fit within the institutional direction, the budget, the

In trying to figure out why The Children's Museum's internal culture was so satisfying and why what we produced was so original, I am convinced it was because we never separated vision from accountability nor responsibility for the welfare of the group from creating the product. We internalized the human values we held dear and embedded them into institutional processes. We thought that administrating the organization could be part of the creative process. We never thought time or money management were beneath us. Rather, they were the levers that allowed us to control the work we did. We thought silliness became us, and we did not have to always be serious to do work that made a difference. We all worked with a novel mix of the new and untried within a value system more old-fashioned than we acknowledged or even knew at the time. We believed that we all held each other in trust. We knew we couldn't have done what we did without each other.

grants process, and the time and money allocation. One would think that the emphasis on all these processes would in fact stifle creativity. To the contrary, every permanent staff member had been intimately involved in budget preparation and knew how it worked. They were sophisticated advocates for ideas, and also for the horse-trading required to get them to fit within the direction and budget of the entire institution. The museum made long term commitments to certain content areas but was also on the lookout for new trends and new ideas.

Designer Sing Hanson in an exhibit that Native American intern Paula Gonsalves had developed and brought back to a Mashpee site.

We learned that we needed to self-fund new ideas in order to become less dependent on project funding. In 1982 we had a blockbuster exhibit *The Art of the Muppets* that netted $150,000 over projections. From that unexpected windfall we created an entrepreneurial R&D fund, and an operating reserve that allowed new experimental projects to be applied for and self-funded. It also allowed us to remain in the black by drawing it down slowly over a number of difficult years.

Both Thinkers and Doers

Part of The Children's Museum success was based on the notion that thinking and doing were linked. Unlike most museums where the thinkers and researchers considered themselves apart from and above the rest of the staff, there was no such hierarchy at the museum.

We believed the doers—craftspeople, finance folks, designers, etc.—brought essential services to the table and should sit as equals. Further, we sometimes interchanged jobs so that designers took a turn at being educators and vice versa.

Every job description had a product associated with it. Our curator/educators were called "developers" and were expected to be multi-talented. Not only were they knowledgeable in their subject matter but comfortable and experienced in producing exhibitions, publications, and curriculum units, in addition to training other people. Job applicants for "developer" were difficult to locate. Our premise was that subject matter expertise, while vital, was not sufficient. Most developers came to us from teaching in middle schools and had been teachers as well as teacher trainers. Some came from informal education settings such as camps and afterschool programs. Many had advanced degrees in their chosen subject but had preferred to practice in a public rather than academic career.

We were all expected to pitch in. Grumpily or not, everyone in the Visitor Center helped run the museum during vacation week (although mandatory helping during the first vacation period at the Wharf led to a revolt). Many staff from other divisions volunteered to help us out as well. We had no security force and no housekeeping staff during the daytime. Those tasks were distributed amongst the rest of us. Our exhibition design and production team also fixed broken windows. We expected the Visitor Services staff to help clean and to provide surveillance, and we trained everyone in the whole museum to help during fire drills.

Examples of Systems

We all believed in the value of systems. Mike was our leader in this and had studied system management theories from elsewhere.

Solutions were expected to be approximate. Invented systems need not be perfect to be deployed. We believed that "trial and error" would improve things. And mistakes honestly made in the search for solutions were never penalized no matter how disastrous. On the other hand, the same mistake repeated was cause for a little supervisory review.

Mike Spock taught us how to "try out" exhibition ideas, and trying out at every level was encouraged. We used tape, brown paper and markers in many public spaces to see if something would work. It fit our aesthetic, and the public believed that they were being invited to help us solve problems. They liked being included in our thinking. (Later in my life, I would find many museums were shy to express their processes, thinking it made them appear unsure and unprofessional.)

- **Budget Systems**

We invented systems to keep track of time on a project-by-project basis. We negotiated time-sharing between divisions. We had line-by-line, month-by-month economic projections for every department. We held monthly budget reviews that were judged against projections. We shared unexpected "profits" (when projections remained on the positive side for six months) equally between the division producing the largess and the general coffers. We re-budgeted twice a year. The overall institution's budget was balanced every year I was there except one.

On the heart-wrenching side we cut staff at mid-year if we were experiencing an economic downturn.

A forerunner of the later Wharf's version, the Sit-Around in the Jamaica Plain museum was a horseshoe-shaped meeting room in which people sat on circular risers. The change in space from traditional conference or meeting room tables and chairs matched the change in management style.

One year all staff voted each to give up a week's salary in order to protect their fellow workers.

• **Project Management Systems**

Staff created workbooks, charts, graphs, and paper formats for many things. They were often given amusing titles but they were serious and useful. The '70s was the beginning of the computer age. We had very young male computer experts on the staff who kept us up to date. We all had computers and used them and their rudimentary software for creating new *digital* printouts, formats, charts, and graphs.

We created detailed progress charts so that we knew if projects were on time, and we tied them to spending analysis so that we did not expend too much too early leaving too little for the end. Every staff member had negotiated job descriptions with expected outcomes. Each was set at the beginning of the fiscal year and readjusted in the mid-term review. Everyone could read a budget, a progress chart, a time sheet, etc. Every supervisor had responsibility for the allocations within their department. All had access to both time and scheduling of their own people.

• **The Matrix**

In order to accommodate the project-based funding that formed the backbone of our creative work, we taught everyone how to live within "matrix management" systems. Every person had a "home-base" manager whose job was to advocate for his/her staff member, recommend him/her for promotion, supervise the person, and do all the boring administrative tasks. In addition, since projects were talent- and interest-based, teams consisted of members from every division. And every project manager reported to the director, whose overarching responsibility (exhibit, administration, schools, and community) fit most closely to the project's content. Thus, most staff associated with exhibit creation reported to me. Yet every exhibit team had members from other divisions. Which division supervised which projects was a matter of heated negotiation.

We believed deeply in the organic development of projects. We thought they could and should revolve around their content and purpose. Many topics, such as early childhood or physical science, had multiple associated products (books, kits, exhibitions, teacher workshops, etc.). It was assumed that product development could start with any product and evolve naturally to the others in random order. While the developer was content-based and would remain involved in the development of each product, the rest of the team would change and be organized based on skills needed and the availability of project funds. This in turn followed from successful grant writing, which in turn was based on institutional priorities.

With so many projects going at any one time, in addition to running the operations of a physical place (i.e., the resource center, the exhibit center, the library, etc.), there was much to track. A complicated system arose where everyone learned a form of time management and made contracts with each manager involved. The managers in turn created time sheets that contracted for percentages of time for each project person in as fine-grained an instrument as half day a week for every month over the twelve-month calendar.

This meant that every person working on a project had to plan their own year, including ongoing responsibilities, holidays, etc., within that framework, and all budgets allocated staff time based on individual contracts. The process required extensive planning and negotiation each year but made it possible for us to be audited effectively by any granting agency with levels of input and expense allocated accurately. We became extremely efficient at this.

Staff who were chronically overworked also became better advocates for themselves when they understood that they were putting way too much time or attention to one project in ways that differed from their agreed time sheets. That condition, when brought to the senior managers' attention, would trigger a process that reapportioned their time to something that approximated 150 percent of a year's allocated work (1,820 hours). With supervisor's direction, staff reluctantly stopped doing certain projects (often their favorite), hired extra help for the overworked staff, or delayed ongoing projects. Since everyone was chronically overworked and money was always in short supply, to say that we did this well would be inaccurate. In each case we believed the complaining staff, we all knew something needed to be stopped or additional help found, but we often delayed taking action when we shouldn't have.

Teams Move

Since our exhibitions were created in teams, no member of a team had more power than any other members. We were credited at the time (along with The Field Museum) with inventing "the team approach to

exhibition development." Much has been written about the team approach in the museum community, because it was intended to reduce the customary power of the curator who had held (and continues to hold) considerable sway over all other aspects of exhibition development. At The Children's Museum, we were often asked to teach the team approach, which soon became standard practice elsewhere. (Sing Hanson created "The Game" that was used as a teaching tool in many seminars.) We worked to codify a process that came naturally to us; we were not intentionally being revolutionary.

Leaving

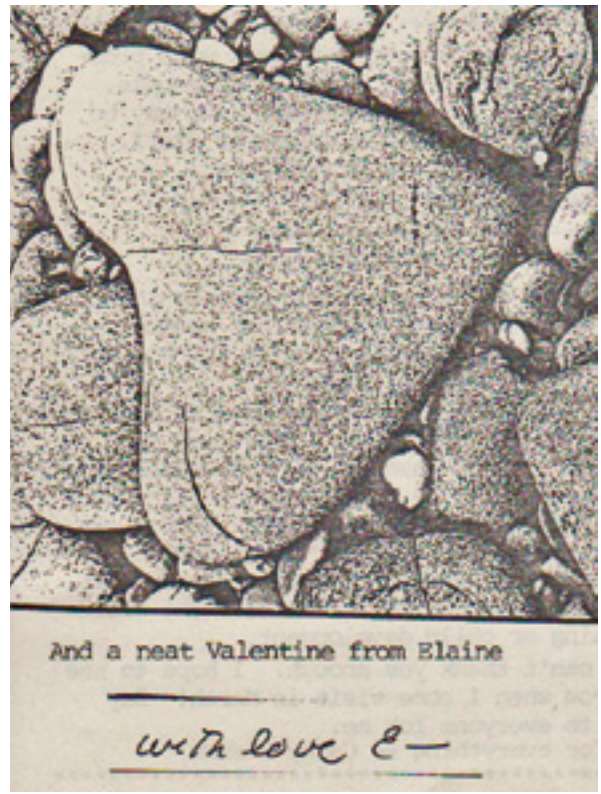
I left the museum in 1987, after sixteen years, to become the deputy assistant secretary for museums at the Smithsonian Institution. My new job entailed partial supervision of fourteen museums, a staff of about 3,000 and a budget of $150 million. In order not to feel overwhelmed, I told myself that all I had learned at The Children's Museum had put me in good stead. I thought I could use the same processes we had used and just add a few zeros to every dollar spent. Since, at The Children's Museum, we had either invented all the systems we used or borrowed them from elsewhere, including "how-to" management books for large corporations that we read avidly, I was sure our systems would be too unsophisticated for the Smithsonian and that I would discover their urbane staff using systems superior to our homegrown version. The reality was the reverse. The Children's Museum staff had loved creating systems that worked. What we had invented or adopted turned out to be very sophisticated indeed.

Almost no middle-management staff in any other institution where I worked was trained and then held accountable for managing their own finances or their own time. Most museums worked on geologic time and didn't think that getting things done was a priority. All the museums I worked in subsequently needed systems imposed on them to accomplish tasks on time and on budget, and they often resented it. The notion of being accountable for the corporate whole was new to them. I became an expert in opening museums on time and on budget, but all the practice of training middle management to account for their work, their time, and their money was a new and unfamiliar requirement wherever I went.

The culture of most museums gave supremacy to the curators and other "intellectuals." Curators thought the business of running the organization was slightly unsavory and reserved for technocrats on whom they simultaneously looked down and were dependent upon. In many institutions there are two operating factions, each resentful of each other and deeply uninterested in each other's work and yet co-dependent. Most museum leadership was complicit in the notion that some work was more worthy than other. The Children's Museum believed that all work was essential for an integrated whole.

In many museums, the intellectuals believe deeply that their work is so lofty that accountability is irrelevant. Overspending and delay are part of their armamentarium. By imposing elsewhere the discipline we had all accepted throughout The Children's Museum, I gained a reputation as a well-known philistine wherever I worked.

I remember the advice Roger Kennedy, director of the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution when I was its deputy assistant secretary for museums, gave me when I lamented that I used to be known as a "nice person." He said, "Check back with those trusted friends and see if you have changed." The reality is that The Children's Museum folk have



Elaine's Valentine, an annual and personalized (!) treat, usually appeared in your mailbox or on your desk when you weren't looking.

remained my friends for life. As they each eventually left the museum, they spread out among many museums and caused change that mattered. Many rose to leadership positions in their respective institutions. Now many are consultants and teachers and much in demand. Yet many of us stayed in touch over the intervening years. We did so because we became each other's touchstone about what mattered in work and life and how to go about it.

Te Papa Compared

Elaine cheering on the museum softball team.

Even in retrospect I find that the quality of staff interaction and the collective regard we had for each other proved unequaled with only one exception. Every other institution with which I have been associated, however worthy, principled, and hard-working, never produced among its staff the wide-spread joy and innovation I witnessed in The Children's Museum in the '70s and '80s. The one exception was the project team of Te Papa during the 1990s when they collectively revitalized the National Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tangarawa in Wellington, New Zealand, in a new building. I served Te Papa as an occasional but deeply committed consultant.

These two museums, The Children's Museum and Te Papa, separated by half a world and two decades, had much in common. Both institutions seemed unparalleled in their coherence, camaraderie, and collective commitment to the visitor. I think their commonalities arose from believing in themselves without taking themselves overly seriously, in being sheltered from public scrutiny until they became famous, in giving themselves permission to become personal friends by socializing outside of work, in delighting in creating self-made systems that worked, and in creating private language and rituals that encouraged generally harmless silliness.

Te Papa's leader, Ken Gorbey, like Mike Spock, was a great listener and encourager, a visionary of stubborn proportions, a man who needed very little public stroking, and less than usual "airtime." He preferred to hire people with indelible idiosyncratic personalities very different one from another. Both Ken and Mike were fair men who gave public hearing to every idea but called a halt to dithering when the way forward was known. The parallels between Ken and Mike are probably very important to understanding the creation of their extraordinary museums.

Staff at both places shared their boss's enthusiasms to explore new uncharted territory, to learn on the job, and to prefer practical solutions over precedence. I always had the feeling that with a change in accent every staff member of one institution would have worked happily at the other.

Summary

In trying to figure out why The Children's Museum's internal culture was so satisfying and why what we produced was so original, I am convinced it was because we never separated vision from accountability nor responsibility for the welfare of the group from creating the product. We internalized the human values we held dear and embedded them into institutional processes. We thought that administrating the organization could be part of the creative process. We never thought time or money management were beneath us. Rather, they were the levers that allowed us to control the work we did. We thought silliness became us, and we did not have to always be serious to do work that made a difference. We all worked with a novel mix of the new and untried within a value system more old-fashioned than we acknowledged or even knew at the time. We believed that we all held each other in trust. We knew we couldn't have done what we did without each other.

For me and for most of the other staff who worked there and left, we brought our lessons to other places and excelled. Wherever we went, we were always considered a little unconventional and odd. We missed each other and kept in touch. We remained each other's touchstones. While I suspect these memories are slightly sugar-coated and it was probably never really as good as I have written, the reality was wonderful enough and made us glad to have been there to participate in it.

In-House Glossary

Ah-hah! Experience: In museums, as in life, the light bulb goes on. Ah-hah, you've got it!

Ahmine, gomine: You have permission, now go and do it.

Aw shucks: The disarming modesty and informal feel that helped us fly under the radar; also refers to cluster of in-house behaviors and strategies of the same flavor (see below).

Baltic birch: The plywood sheets often used to build exhibit furniture, giving rise to the "Scandinavian Hippie" look of the place.

Beginning learners: Learning isn't just for kids; we can all start on something new.

Beige/orange/blue aprons: colored aprons denoting jobs of floor staff.

Black hats, white hats: Trouble in paradise—hard times at the museum; time for Phoenix (see below).

Blue books: blue binders for each exhibit area compiled by the developer and containing useful background information for changing floor staff.

Bottle of wine maneuver: Let's get together outside the team meeting and make a deal.

Bring back goofy: Let's not be so earnest; let's do something fun.

Broker: Person responsible for moving the project along: facilitator, dealmaker, timekeeper, arbiter on fairness and bad behavior.

Brown paper bag economics: An aw-shucks-strategy of printing good design on humble paper at great expense.

Bunnies and Duckies: Cloying, cute ideas or styles.

Camping out: Roughing it in offices in unfinished Bay 5 after the museum's move to the Wharf.

Cardboard carpentry: Triwall at work in the hands of staff, teachers, kids, and parents (see Triwall below).

Carpet Diem: Renovation project begun with new rugs.

Chair game: The exhibit's about chairs; the game's about the exhibit team process.

Children's Museum Mafia: Staff who were highly active in national museum activities.

Client: Team member who sets parameters, sends team off to work, and has the last say in decisions.

Client-centered: Completely different than "Client" (above), this term referred to museum activities that were primarily focused on the needs and wants of audiences rather than on subject matter and objects, as in traditional museums.

Depth on the bench (developers): In-house staff expertise in content and audience learning styles; staff who are also able to work in multiple formats.

Desert boots: Formal aw-shucks Spock footwear.

Designer: A team member who is delighted to have a say from the beginning, not just get marching orders at the end.

Developer: A person responsible for content of an exhibit, program, kit, book, etc.

Developer's Revelation (DevRev): The formal moment in the exhibit development team process where the developer lays out her vision of what it's all about for the rest of the team. (The rumor that developers have direct access to a higher power is usually untrue.)

Everybody into the pool: We're all in this together.

Experts are flying in from the coast: We're going to get a renowned authority to validate what we said in the first place.

Feels like us: Staff "evaluation tool" based on shared values and institutional memory.

Fertutzed: Messed up.

Flappers and crankers: Mechanical, hands-on exhibit techniques that hold a visitor long enough to (perhaps) engage with the content, not just the device.

Going to Miami: A Visitor Center team meeting.

Green and leafy: Boring! As in nutrition exhibits.

Guerilla graphics/gorilla graphics: See "pioneer graphics."

Guinea pig days: Visitors served as guinea pigs to help us with exhibit tryouts.

Hang up the banner and the turtle dies: A sad fable about unforeseen consequences.

Haunted House: Popular fund-raising strategy allowing staff to indulge fantasies and don gorilla suits for a week.

Home base: The department in which an individual staff member was based with in a matrix system.

Hung white: A withering comment from an advisor about a vivid community art exhibit that was installed in perfectly straight lines in identical black metal gallery frames.

Kafuckta: A word denoting what happens when people kucklefuck around; language not used in public spaces.

Layered learning: Stacking easily accessed exhibit content in depth so an intrigued visitor can continue to explore ideas at will on the site.

Lifelong learning: It's never too early or too late for learning about something that really catches your interest.

Kids at Risk: Special program for high-risk adolescents who became a junior staff group doing valuable work in the museum.

Management by wandering about: In complex times senior staff get out of their offices and hang around the water cooler more.

MATCh Kits: Early experimental multimedia curriculum kit boxes for use in schools.

Matrix management: A borrowed organizational system in which people with similar skills are pooled and work for different managers on different projects.

Messing about: An aw-shucks term meaning open-ended playing with stuff.

The Milk Bottle: Museum icon at Wharf, a giant antique wooden milk bottle that was a food-selling concession.

Neutral turf: A location free of limiting or problematic characteristics; the Wharf was located in a "neutral" industrial neighborhood.

Noodling around: Same as messing about.

Original object: If you can't let visitors handle precious objects, try one of these options:

- expendable original;
- reproduction;
- duplicate;
- model;
- functional analog (something similar to but not exactly the same as the original);
- contemporary example; or
- computer simulation.

OW69: Stock white in paint color vocabulary; also blah.

Pencils in the air!: Write down what I'm saying and then do it!

Phoenix: We got outside help to help us begin the reinvention of the ways we worked together.

Pioneer graphics: A series of inexpensive and flexible blank graphic formats for tryouts.

Plaid: Visually complex exhibits which can be read in

Staff designers created museum "money" in 1974 for a program around the *Kids 5 and 10 Cent Store*. To replace traditional presidential head icons, staff chose two of Elaine's favorite items from the collections, the Flora McFlimsy doll and Benjamin Bear—both with fabulous wardrobes—and the museum's boa constrictor Rudy.

many ways.

Plum pudding: A program area containing all resources in close proximity for easy learning (e.g. Japanese House, collections, workshop room, resource center, reading room, staff offices).

Quick and dirty: Produce something but don't invest too much time in it until you know more.

Red boots: Small Superman action figure boots from Recycle—thousands of them—"installed" everywhere by staff.

Red-yellow-green: Study storage signs: Don't touch (red); touch gently (yellow); you may handle this (green).

Risk-taking: An accepted strategy for learning.

Risk-taking and failing: It's okay. What did you learn? Don't do it again.

Shoestring work: Cheap but smart.

Shut up and eat your lunch: Okay, enough now.

Signed exhibits: Exhibits that reflected a developer's personal statement. This material did not come down from on high; visitors see that real folks made personal choices here.

Sit-Around: A horseshoe-shaped meeting room with risers for floor sitters.

So What?: The exhibit is about this particular thing. So please explain to us why this is important to your audiences.

Spocked: Staff hit by a Directorial after-thought, as in "You got Spocked."

Spockarama World of Mirth: Ironic reaction of staff to a wide variety of stimuli.

Study storage: Supervised collections storage in which visitors are given closer access to objects chosen and packaged to withstand different levels of use.

Stuff: An aw-shucks term referring to engaging objects and ideas.

Talkbacks: An exhibit technique of inviting the public to record and post their opinions within an exhibit.

TCM team process of exhibition development: An evolving system of formal road marks designed to plan and build exhibits. Team works together right from the get-go.

This is a toy job: As in, "I'm going out and get me a real job."

Tiny Town: Cute, scaled-down exhibit environments; see Bunnies and Duckies (above).

Too little is not enough, too much is just sufficient: General folk wisdom among museum people and other collectors.

The Cliff: The risky moment when a not-for-profit's capital campaign is over and it has to return to admissions revenue and the soft-money life.

Tryouts: Prototyping ideas and methods before committing to final exhibit versions.

Triwall: Divine and inexpensive corrugated cardboard sheet material used for exhibit tryouts.

Turn it over and paint it blue: Adaptive reuse of exhibit furniture.

Voice: Developers sign their exhibits in their own voice and sometimes include photos of themselves.

Wangs: Early computer/calculators from Wang Company used in our first computer exhibits.

Weak tea: When an exhibit isn't quite ready for the opening but the public won't know what it is missing.

We came to play!: Battle cry of the museum softball team.

Wednesday Mornings: The time set aside for groups of kids with disabilities to visit the museum.

We may be slow but our work is poor: See final entry below.

What's Inside?: A very early interactive exhibit; became a tryout for exhibits that followed.

Wizard of Oz Theory: If you name it, it's real. We got good at this. See entry below.

Working under the table / flying under the radar: You can take big risks when no one is looking.

You can have it fast, cheap or good; pick any two: The Design & Production team specialized in irony and a blue-collar outlook.

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