



The Nonprofit Whisperer

Many organizations are stuck in less-than-useful modes of operating, “but change is here to stay in our sector,” writes the Nonprofit Whisperer—and learning to manage it well is critical. “The first step to creating a healthy organizational culture,” she writes, “is to create alignment across the staff and board by revisiting purpose and mission and, ideally, values.” This kind of change takes a lot of time and effort, she warns, but if the whole organization opts in, the process will ultimately be rewarding.

DEAR NONPROFIT WHISPERER,
My organization’s culture suffers from department silos. Departments in this small and venerable museum don’t communicate and work effectively with each other, and there is quite a bit of gossiping and undermining among coworkers. Help! How can we break down these barriers and begin to respect one another better?

We also suffer from a “We have always done it this way” and “That won’t work” ethos, which stunts our creativity and frustrates newer staff.

Alignment Seeker

Dear Alignment Seeker,

A healthy organizational culture is really important for staff to do their best work and, as a result, for a nonprofit to thrive. Sometimes, mature organizations enter a phase post-start-up (often characterized as the third stage of organizational development) in which, due to strength of programming, robust fundraising, and sound operations, programs proliferate.

Staff can sometimes retreat into their department or program area fiefdoms and become siloed—working chiefly for the mini-mission of the department and forgetting the overall purpose. If such behavior is not caught and addressed, departments can compete with or get snarky about other parts of the organization. Small museums in particular can be somewhat weighted toward administrative positions, may have a smaller program staff, and their program will often drive the mission—and such tendencies may be leading to some of the issues in your case.

The big step here, which is also the first step to creating a healthy organizational culture, is to *create alignment* across the staff and board by revisiting purpose and mission and, ideally, values. This kind of organizational change management is not easy. It takes a savvy leader who can stand up on the balcony, watch the activity below, and understand where to start moving the culture to more positive places. It is not a fast process,

and may entail weeding out some bad actors who thrive in dysfunction and would rather not be a part of creating a healthy workplace. It necessitates attention and energy from leadership, who must be brave enough (like you) to identify the issue and gather in staff leaders (and possibly board members) to begin to create a change-management process.

Small, long-standing organizations regularly need to discuss who they are right now (current reality). For instance: Are you a house museum? A curated tribute to a key artist? A place for historians to do specialized research? A wedding and events venue? All of the above? If so, how are any or all of such facets contributing to overall purpose and vision? Then, you must discuss your preferred future reality—both strategically and operationally, but also regarding workplace culture. Finally, create an alignment of staff and board, so that all are rowing in the same direction toward that future.

Aligning is typically the job of the executive director; however, it is often helpful to have a consultant come in as part of revisiting the strategic plan or coming up with a new one—with the knowledge that the organization has become too siloed. The executive, optimally with expert consultant support, needs to create a special focus on revisiting *purpose* (the reason the museum exists), *vision* (a long-term, aspirational view of where you want to be in, say, ten years), and *mission* (a five- to ten-year description of how the organization will move toward its purpose and vision). And this is where values should be discussed, which then should be translated into behaviors. Ask yourselves: “What would we want visitors to the museum to witness regarding our behavior toward each other?” Those values, with attached agreed-upon behaviors, should then be reinforced through supervision and evaluation. Allowing a culture of gossip and disrespect will only lead to a downward spiral for the organization. You may want to institutionalize some communication standards to which everyone adheres.

Now to the system pushback of statements like “We have always done it this way” or “That won’t work” that you describe. This points to a group of folks who have become comfortable with the status quo. But change is here to stay in our sector, and learning to manage it well is a critical point of emphasis for nonprofit boards, managers, and staff. Multiple articles in the *Nonprofit Quarterly* have spoken to the struggles of museums to remain relevant and survive.¹ These are challenging times for museums, and many are in the process of reinventing themselves for younger and more diverse audiences. Creating programs and curating experiences for a changing world is an opportunity that calls for constant evolution and adaptation.

I wish you good luck! The alignment/change-management path, if colleagues are willing to join you, will be rewarding—but plan on at least a couple of years of working it to see results. And if you continue to see resistance—or leadership does not move to align the organization and culture—you may wish to seek opportunities elsewhere.

NOTE

1. See, for example, Erin Rubin, “Decolonize This Place: Brooklyn Museum Remains Flashpoint of Displacement,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, May 2, 2018, nonprofitquarterly.org/2018/05/02/decolonize-place-brooklyn-museum-remains-flashpoint-displacement/; Eileen Cunniffe, “Nonprofit Museums Face a Core Quandary: At What Price Art?,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, January 17, 2018, nonprofitquarterly.org/2018/01/17/nonprofit

-museums-face-core-quandary-price-art/; Anna Berry, “Beyond Bake Sales: How Small Nonprofit Museums Stay Afloat,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, March 27, 2017, nonprofitquarterly.org/2017/03/27/beyond-bake-sales-how-small-non-profit-museums-stay-afloat/; and Anne Ferola, Jennifer Ginsberg, and Martice Sutton, “Saving the August Wilson Center,” *Nonprofit Quarterly* 22, no. 4, Winter 2015, nonprofitquarterly.org/2016/01/20/saving-the-august-wilson-center/.

THE NONPROFIT WHISPERER has over thirty years of experience in the nonprofit sector, serving variously as nonprofit staff and board member, foundation staff member, and nonprofit management consultant.

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