

The 21st Century Leadership Challenge By Marsha Semmel

The 21st century leadership challenge—is one I think about every day, for many reasons.

First, this past six months I've been thrust back into a CEO role. I've had a chance to think hard about this—and gather all of my experience and lessons learned from previous leadership positions and apply them as the interim head of a federal agency. And, in the course of taking on this role, I reflected long and hard about the key attributes of an effective leader, especially one in a transitional role. What I needed to prioritize, where and how I was to spend my limited time.

Second, being agency lead on our *Museums, Libraries and 21st Century Skills* report (now a full-scale initiative) required some hard thinking and focus on leadership. The 21st century skills work posits new roles for library and museum leaders as well as suggesting the type of institutions possible for museums and libraries to become, within their communities.

Third, as though driven by some karmic force, my personal and professional orbits have given me the great good fortune of intersecting with some powerful leaders and leadership experts—within and outside of the non-profit sector. I've had the extraordinary opportunity to be with – and learn from – exceptional leaders, and to see many common themes. I've learned a lot: about the personal and organizational attributes that I believe are essential for leadership today.

When I consider those core attributes that are fundamental to good leadership, I usually turn to *The Leadership Challenge*, a volume by James Kouzes and Barry Posner which identifies five practices of exemplary leadership: model the way (clarify values, set the example); inspire a shared vision; challenge the process (search for opportunities; experiment and take risks); enable others to act (foster collaboration, strengthen others); and encourage the heart, (recognize contributions and celebrate values and victories).

I'd like to add two additional leadership perspectives, from people I met this summer at the Craigslist Foundation Boot Camp. Chip Conley, founder and CEO of Joie de Vivre Hospitality, a boutique hotel chain in California, has written a book called *Peak: How Great Companies Get Their Mojo From Maslow*. I found Chip's insights about business, drawn from his study of psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs pyramid (from survival to self-actualization) quite powerful. The hierarchy of needs pyramid moves from basic physiological needs (such as sleep, water, food) through 'safety,' 'social/belonging,' 'esteem' and ultimately 'self-actualization,' where people have transient/transcendental moments call 'peak experiences that have a truly transformative power.

What I find fascinating about Conley's interpretation is his distillation of the pyramid into three basic strata: survival, success, and transformation and his creation of three versions, based on different types of relationships: with employees; with customers, and with investors. In each type of relationship, an institution can choose to address basic needs, meeting basic expectations, or aim for the apex of the pyramid. This means striving for creating opportunities for meaningful work for your staff, meeting

unrecognized needs of your customers (creating evangelism); and giving investors a sense of legacy and impact, creating pride of ownership.

In his recent book, *Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World*, The Institute for the Future's Bob Johansen describes the VUCA world of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. A world where new emerging economies, financial disruptions, different and powerful diasporas, technologies, ecosystems, neuroscientific discoveries, climate change, food webs, amplified organizations, and a new golden age of oceanography will create extraordinary new opportunities for connectedness and common action or for increased disruptions and conflict.

In this world of the future, Johansen posits we will continue to need such enduring leadership skills as physical and mental discipline; active attention; readiness discipline; urgent patience, storytelling and listening; humble strength, and, importantly, synchronicity—the ability to make meaning from new stimuli by finding connections and patterns that are not obvious to others.

But these skills are not sufficient for confronting the challenges of the VUCA world. Johansen describes such *new* skills as the maker instinct, dilemma flipping, immersive learning ability, rapid prototyping, and, most important of all, commons creating. He notes, “A commons is a platform on which individuals and groups can build for the greater good.... In a commons game, win/win solutions are the goal.” Johansen believes that “the best leaders are not isolated; they are ravenous networkers with active links all around the world. In the future, economies of scale (in which bigger is almost always better) give way to economies of organization (in which you are what you can organize). Leadership is all about engagement, and networked media provide several ways in which leaders can engage to make better futures.” Johansen states that “creating commons is the most ambitious and demanding new leadership skill.” Those who have command of these skills, suggests Johansen, can create a positive VUCA world, characterized by vision, understanding, clarity, and agility.

Now let's focus on museums as we link these ideas to our institutions. Our *Museums, Libraries & 21st Century Skills* initiative suggests some strategies:

In our report, we describe the changing world of work, citizen engagement, globalization, and technology. Of course, these are all intertwined. We are in a global knowledge economy—or what some now say is a global creative economy. There will be fewer and fewer routine, repetitive jobs. Our report outlines a whole list of skills that our citizens and workers will need to function fully and successfully in this new world. These skills include learning and innovation skills (critical thinking/problem solving; creativity and innovation; communication and collaboration); information, media and technology skills; life and career skills (flexibility and adaptability; cross-cultural skills; productivity and accountability; initiative and self direction); and such 21st century themes as global awareness, financial literacy; health literacy; environmental literacy; civic literacy. In short, in addition to the 3 R's, we need the “4 C's”- critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication.

For the project, we entered a national conversation that was already in high gear: in corporate America, in the formal (K-16) education community, in higher education, in the Department of Labor, and in other organizations around the world. We used the

language that had been framed *outside* our field: our goal was to situate libraries and museums in this spirited national and international discourse. Throughout the process, we worked with a national task force of museum and library leaders and conducted a series of vetting sessions in conjunction with various service organization meetings.

The IMLS report was designed to document ways in which museums and libraries are powerful learning organizations that already address our 21st century learning needs and to suggest tangible ways in which they can do a more intentional and purposeful job in that work. In addition to case studies, the report includes a pan-institutional self-assessment tool that describes early, transitional and 21st century museum and library practice in such areas as human capital, physical and online space, collections and programming, access, partnerships and accountability. A tenet of the work is deep engagement with audiences and community, so the report also includes a community learning scan that is designed to help a single museum or library position itself within a larger multi-institutional learning network. We also created a web site, www.imls21stcenturyskills.org, with a quick online version of the self-assessment tool and many other resources.

Museum leaders are using the report – and the self-assessment tool – in their strategic planning activities, with several reporting that it is particularly effective with board members who represent many different organizations within the community.

We are inviting grant proposals that address these skills, conducting a series of webinars for museums and libraries, and are in the midst of a *Making the Learning Connection* national tour, holding workshops in different cities where library and museum leaders invite colleagues and representatives from other organizations to explore a collaborative learning agenda that can address pressing community needs.

Underlying the 21st Century Skills report is the assumption that museums and libraries, working with community stakeholders, can leverage their considerable learning resources for broader learning gain. As we learn more about neuroscience and the power and potential of out-of-school learning, we have a wonderful opportunity ahead of us. This is the spirit in which we have joined forces with the MacArthur Foundation to fund 30 learning labs around the country, where youthful innovation and creativity can flower. It is a belief that, with attention to research, proven best practice, empowering our audiences, and in concert with community, museums and libraries can not merely participate in learning innovation, but can help drive it.

What are the leadership qualities required of the museum and its leaders throughout the organization?

I'd like to build on our 21st century skills report and the focus on the 4 C's: Critical Thinking, Creativity, Communication, and Collaboration. Let me be clear: emphasizing these attributes does not require museums to shift from their missions. But they suggest ways in which the enormously rich resources of our museums – of all kinds – including our collections, our spaces, our talented and knowledgeable staff and volunteers, can be more purposefully mobilized in the service of our communities.

Critical Thinking: In these days when we are all bombarded with, surrounded by, torrents of information from an ever increasing variety of media – information that needs

to be analyzed and understood as we make so many daily choices and as we all struggle to make sense of the world around us, what are museums doing to enable our communities to analyze that information thoughtfully? No matter what discipline your museum represents – science, history, art – there are ways in which you can use your collections, exhibitions, and programs to empower your audiences to a greater understanding of documents, historical periods, scientific discoveries, visual cues. How are you linking your work intentionally with information literacy, digital literacy, media literacy?

Creativity: The collections, spaces, exhibits, and programs in our museums reflect human creativity and innovation; they speak to our historic, artistic, scientific heritage and the saga of invention, scientific experimentation, aesthetic breakthroughs, technological mastery of many media and materials, and solutions to what once were considered unsolvable problems and challenges. These artifacts – and their related stories – are often the most memorable and inspiring aspects of our museums. They provide for our visitors moments of awe and imagination, and can make us feel a part of an ongoing and powerful human story.

Most museums now embrace interactivity and have spaces for hands on experiences. We are doing a better job of aggregating current research—and conducting more -- about the power of this learning. But there are many opportunities to move more boldly into this arena. How do we harness and privilege the growing power of participatory, peer-based learning. What can we learn from the DIY “Maker Faire” movement that taps the urge to create, tinker, make, “look under the hood,” and get one’s hands dirty and mind engaged. This movement has been energized by (but is not restricted to) the connective power of social media. There is interest and excitement around ‘citizen science’ and ‘citizen journalism.’ Maker Faire founder Dale Dougherty talks of the importance of “an open culture that supports exploration, permits failure, and fosters creativity and personal development.” How do we nurture the role of museums as hubs for creativity and innovation through encouraging tinkering and exploration, linking audiences to their passions and curiosity, and employing effective mentorship and coaching?

Communication: Here, I think the operant word is two-way communication. Are we as institutions listening as well as presenting? How are we communicating with our audiences, our diverse populations, our colleague organizations? Are we designing our programs, exhibitions, and experiences in ways that facilitate communication? Are we building communications skills in our audiences? One of the case studies in our 21st Century Skills report is the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s Art Speaks! program, developed by the museum and four other art institutions in concert with the Philadelphia School District. The program introduces fourth graders to art museums and art concepts while reinforcing reading, writing, and creative thinking strategies that are embedded in the school district’s literacy and visual arts curriculum. Verbal and visual expressions are linked throughout.

Finally, and in my view most important of all, the fourth “C”, **Collaboration**. From my vantage point at IMLS, I continue to see libraries defining themselves as

networks, systems, whereas our museums too often continue to act islands, not working together in effective in networks—whether they are geographically defined, discipline-defined or linked in other ways. Collaboration also means that our museums need to be intentionally embedded in their communities and work with un-like organizations to address critical community learning needs. This is the notion of the “commons” that Bob Johansen talks about. And there’s more. Collaboration also refers to the ‘de-silo-izing’ our own organizations and building a stronger collaborative ethic **within** the museum. Collaboration for the public good involves sensitivity to community needs, awareness of demographic trends, engaging in increasingly shared work and developing and working towards shared and common outcomes. Our museums need to step up, in more visible ways, as solutions to some of most pressing problems. This is not easy, but it is, in my view, essential to our leadership for the future.

In sum, today we are in the midst of:

- Learning more about learning. The recent *Learning Science in Informal Environments* speaks to the potential for lifelong, lifewide, and lifedeep learning;
- Global demographic and economic shifts that are impacting the nature of work and the composition of our communities;
- A crisis of student engagement, with many students becoming progressively more dis-engaged by the time they get to high school;
- A resurgence in making, doing, and connected DIY interest groups;
- Only beginning to tap the potential of digital learning technologies, such as games and simulations;
- A shift in beliefs about authority: from experts presenting content for consumption to networks creating knowledge.

We need to seize the moment. We have a wonderful leadership opportunity in front of us: will we take it!?!