

# Museum Hiring: It's About the Whole, Not for the Other-than

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Source: Leadership Matters



This week in discussion with our Johns Hopkins class we asked students about threats to 21st-century museums. While there were outliers who mentioned the lack of leadership training, poor pay, and becoming a pink collar field, the vast majority felt diversity was today's biggest challenge. And by diversity, they meant its absence. This group is young, hopeful, largely female, and mostly Caucasian, yet they see our field as riddled with white, male patriarchy.

To be totally transparent, we here at *Leadership Matters* are older, white, straight and female. We occupy a weird nether-world that has trouble claiming a demographic silo so there may be some who bristle when we write about diversity and leadership. But as people who've watched the museum world, and particularly museum leadership, for a long time, we believe this field is overdue for change. And creating diversity by checking boxes—one handicapped staff member plus one LGBTQ person, plus one person of color, plus one transgender individual equals diversity—is not the answer. In fact, it can result in a lonely group of individuals who are burdened with representing an entire population, and who feel they've only been hired because of who they're not. And who aren't they? They aren't your usual Caucasian, privileged, cisgender, straight, liberal-arts college crowd. So what should you do? ***How about hiring for the whole not for other-than?***

How do you do that? Know *your* community. That's your actual community, meaning your museum neighborhood, not the people who come to openings. Know your staff. Know where you want your organization to go, and who your museum cares about. Hire to mirror your forward motion. Hire to create a team, not to check boxes, but make sure you've done due diligence in spreading the word. Don't place one advertisement with your regional museum service program and call it a day. Put the ad in as many places as you can afford and see who you attract.

Be willing to invest some time in the process. Hiring new staff is far more complex than ordering from Amazon, and yet too many organizations treat it in much the same way. They don't discuss what the new or revised position could or should look like, how it might fit into the organization, and most importantly how one particular position adds to or complements a team. Add to that a boatload of bias, and it's easy to hire the same old, same old.

When we wrote "Know your staff" above, we really meant it. Even if you work at an organization as big as some small towns, someone knows the group of people you are hiring for. They know whether they interact with the community daily or move entirely behind the scenes. They know whether they're chummy, go out for drinks together, and finish everything on time but at the last minute or whether they are goal driven and competitive. And they know whether their team really needs a master's degree or whether a bachelor's degree and a lot of imagination will move the ball up the field just fine.

If you're the board and hiring for the ED position, you know what's on the "to-do" list at the micro and macro level. If you're making a huge shift, you know you're going to need someone who will smile and be personable, someone who can sell change. That means you must park your bias at the door. Listen and watch. Again, don't choose the person who makes you comfortable; choose the person that's the best fit for the job.

I would be doing us all a disservice if I made it sound as simple as applying good listening techniques. Hiring is a complicated process, where bias, aspiration, hope, and memory frequently clash. **AAM offers good resources** on how to make the process more open and transparent. Don't forget too, part of hiring and keeping a diverse staff is to maintain an equitable workplace. Maybe now's the moment to make sure your 2019 to-do list includes:

- a gender pay equity audit.
- a values statement—what does your organization believe in back stage away from the public?
- an HR/personnel policy that includes a standard of conduct and anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies.
- An understanding of what it costs to live in your museum's neighborhood, city or town.
- Know what diversity means in your community. Know who's *not* at your table.

Once again, hiring for social media/PR value only nets disappointment and expense. Instead, hire because you want a diverse crowd around your table. Because the diverse crowd is the best crowd and diverse teams are imaginative teams. And who isn't looking for the dream team?

**Joan Baldwin**

Image: *Harvard Gazette*, Harvard University