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October 2015, Western Museums Association

Workplace Culture Matters! . . . at Adoption Museum Project

Adoption Museum Project is a social change organization. We use the power of museums to address an important and complex social issue: adoption. Our mission is to catalyze conversations that create positive social change – so that all people involved in adoption experience dignity and justice.

We are less than three years old. Someday, we hope to have a museum building of our own that is the center of a multi-platform initiative. In the meantime, we partner with existing organizations who invite us collaborate in their physical and virtual spaces.

As a start-up organization, we have the opportunity to define the kind of culture we want to have – and then build it into the DNA, from the beginning. Values are only one part of cultural DNA. At our early stage, values are what we are thinking about the most.

Here's how we are defining a value: **a habit of the heart that is essential to achieve our mission.**

This definition guides us on many levels. It links our values directly to our mission – to our impact in the world. It says that we need to identify the few, essential ways of being that will inform everything else we do. It borrows Parker Palmer's expansive definition of the heart: that place where all our ways of knowing converge – intellectual, emotional, intuitive, imaginative, and sensory among others. And it says that these values are habits that need to be consciously supported and frequently practiced. As we do this work in service of our mission, we also benefit. We become the world we wish to see.

So what are Adoption Museum Project's values? It's a work on progress. Here's what's on the table for us right now: **conversation, compassion, and contemplation.** We think that each one is at the core of what's necessary for us to achieve our mission; together, these values unlock everything else. Each one can be learned. And each one can be practiced by every person in the organization, every day.

Our intention is to walk our talk as we grow. I hope that someday we can offer ongoing staff training entitled "How to Have Difficult Conversations," so we can talk productively about diversity and wages and other complex topics. Maybe we'll begin meetings with a deep breath. Perhaps we'll require that project plans leave time for face-to-face discussion. The possibilities are endless and important.

What are the habits of heart that everyone in your organization must cultivate to achieve your mission?

Can you think of a habit that you personally, or your team, can cultivate to help your museum achieve its mission?

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Workplace Culture Matters! . . . at the San Diego Museum of Man

The San Diego Museum of Man's mission is "inspiring human connections by exploring the human experience." We do this by creating and holding a space of discourse for meaningful conversations about topics that really matter. We believe that if we want to effectively play this role in our community, however, we must first find ways of creating and holding this same space internally.

In other words, we strive to "walk the talk" within the core of our institution. This includes how we relate to one another as a staff, as a board, and as a larger staff/board community. It also applies to how we relate to our collections and their descendent communities.

We call our commitment to aligning the external with the internal as our "World peace starts at home" initiative. It's our concerted effort to put our workplace culture and culture of learning front and center, and it includes several different components. We are getting better and better at it every day.

Some Lessons Learned

Put a line item in the budget. If you really believe in workplace culture, invest in it.

Hire an HR expert. You can't afford not to have someone driving workplace culture for the museum.

Hire for values. You know you have a fit when what the applicant needs to grow at this particular point in his/her journey coincides what the museum needs to grow in its journey.

Seriously think about compensation. Check out "Museum Workers Speak" for help down that path.

A few of the initiatives we have tried—some successfully, some not so much
Improv. We start every one of our monthly all-staff meetings with an improv activity.

Dog-friendly Fridays. You are welcome to bring your furry friend in! Just don't get three strikes...

Museum bucks. Here's \$200. Use it to make the museum a better place however you see fit!

CEO chats. We hold a monthly open forum where anyone can ask the CEO any question they want.

Financial transparency. Every all-staff meeting includes an update on our monthly and YTD financials.

Bonus equity. This year, every employee received an \$1,800 bonus. It was transformational.

All-staff retreat. We close the museum once a year, go to beautiful place, and connect with each other. Walking meetings. Work in a beautiful place? Get out from behind your desk and shake your bon-bon!

Lots of Museum-related perks! Welcome bags/lunches, VIP parking spot for a week, free Tower tour for family/friends, generous benefits, family-friendly holiday party, professional development funds, summer dress code, and more!

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Workplace Culture Matters! . . . at the Oakland Museum of California

The mission of the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) is to inspire all Californians to create a more vibrant future for themselves and their community. We are striving to inspire transformation for our visitors individually while inspiring broader social and public impact. In order to achieve our impact and truly fulfill our mission requires that we begin our work at home – with our own organizational culture and by being the change we want to see. Our employee value proposition is: “OMCA envisions and encourages the practice of leadership at all levels. The Museum is committed to identifying and cultivating a workforce that expresses a sense of agency, collaboration, and empathy internally and with the external community in an effort to advance OMCA’s mission, vision and values.” We are thinking about workplace culture in three major ways:

Aligning with Our Values

We spend a lot of time thinking about our values and working to ensure that every staff member and trustee embodies the Museum’s values and aligns their work to these values as well as to the overall institutional goals and priorities. OMCA’s values are: Community, Innovation, Commitment and Excellence. Some steps we’ve taken are:

- Including the values as the first element of every job description and in our job descriptions for trustees;
- Setting individual performance goals and department goals around the institution’s yearly priorities, including evaluating core competencies that relate to these priorities and to the Museum’s core values;
- Regularly discussing values, institutional vision, and impact goals at department meetings, full staff meetings, and Board of Trustee meetings; and
- Implementing a compensation and benefits philosophy that ensures equity and marketplace competitiveness.

Cultivating Leadership and Learning at Every Level

We are committed to promoting a learning culture and encouraging leadership throughout the organization. To that end, we’ve created:

- The Leadership Advisory Team. Now launching the fourth “class,” the LEAD Team was created in 2011 to act in an advisory capacity to support staff communication, development, and team building, and to provide new perspectives and creative solutions for the ongoing growth and renewal of OMCA staff. We’ve now had more than 40 people participate as members of the LEAD Team; and
- OMCA-You. This is a forum for professional development by and for Museum staff. Staff members offer sessions in everything from a “font tour” of our galleries led by our graphic designer, to debriefings on conferences, to a workshop on design thinking.

Building Staff Capacity

Finally, in order for OMCA to truly serve as a forum for public dialogue and community convening, we’ve undertaken specific training to enhance our staff capacity. Two of our recent trainings have included:

- Sessions with leaders from the Levine Museum of the New South on “listening circles,” designed to provide a space for community feedback – including from staff and Board members -- into exhibitions, particularly on sensitive or controversial topics; and
- A three-day training with the Institutional Coalition of Sites of Conscience on the “Arc of Dialogue,” and facilitating community dialogue.