

A Resource

SPRING 2003

for AAM

Peer Reviewers

NEWStandard

AMERICAN  ASSOCIATION OF MUSEUMS

[What's the BIG IDEA?]

This feature presents the history, theory or critical points of the theme to provide a broad context for the issue.

Effective Communication during Site Visits

Terrie Nollinske, Ph.D., Former Director of Education, Lincoln Park Zoo, Chicago, IL

Effective communication occurs when we share feelings or ideas, resulting in some type of mutual understanding. Accompanying gestures, the tone of voice, facial expressions, or the way we sit or stand influences how others perceive our message and us.

Each of us has a unique style of communication to which we must pay particular attention when conducting visits for the Accreditation Program or the Museum Assessment Program.

The visit's purpose also influences communication. Accreditation peer reviewers gather information and record observations to assist the Accreditation Commission in determining whether the museum meets the characteristics of an accreditable museum. MAP reviewers provide feedback and are more consultative and collaborative.

ESTABLISHING RAPPORT
Establishing rapport begins the minute you walk in the door and continues until your final goodbye. Any site visit is stressful, and it is the responsibility of the reviewer to put museum staff at ease—to begin with a friendly greeting and to be sincere and attentive throughout. Establishing rapport is not about control, expert authority, or power. It is about mutual respect and trust. Some techniques include explaining the site visit process, explaining any constraints when providing feedback, apprising staff that the only stupid question is the one that remains unasked, giving all museum staff complete and undivided attention, and eliminating all interruptions.

Convening in a comfortable, quiet meeting room helps people relax. Making eye contact helps establish a one-to-one relationship. Asking each individual what they are most proud to have contributed to the museum is one way to learn about individual agendas and passions.

This author uses “rules of the day” when teaching and applies these same rules during site visits. The rules encourage others to actively participate in and contribute to discussions. The rules are to listen to what is said and *how* it is said; to confine discussion to the topic at hand; for the speaker to own his view using “I” instead of “we” or “they”; to respect the views of
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THEME

This issue of *NEWStandard* looks at some key elements of effective site visits.

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What's the Big Idea

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others; to acknowledge and appreciate differences; to avoid sarcasm, blame, or attack; and to honor confidentiality.

Other ways to minimize barriers to communication are to use common language and avoid jargon, to speak at a moderate speed in an expressive voice heard by all, to create an environment of acceptance through genuine interest and focused attention, and to minimize anxiety through an unruffled approach that seeks to motivate and educate rather than to criticize.

GATHERING INFORMATION AND MAKING OBSERVATIONS

The best communicators are those who really listen and seek to understand. Reviewers might find active listening techniques helpful when gathering information. Reviewers might nod, make eye contact, or say "ummm, I see, or yes" to let the speaker know that attention is being paid. Reviewers might ask questions to clarify an issue or seek additional information. They can express support by saying "what a great idea" or disagree by saying "I believe the figures are actually higher" or by referring to the self-study document and clarifying discrepancies. Reviewers might paraphrase, restating the speaker's message in his or her own words, to assure understanding. Listening to paraphrased thoughts provides a "time out" and helps everyone clarify their thoughts.

When gathering information and making observations, reviewers use questions to form connections between facts, thoughts, and feelings. Open-ended questions (ones that require more than a yes or no answer) are used to establish rapport, obtain information, or reveal feelings and opinions. Closed-ended questions (those that require

a yes/no answer or force a choice between two or more options) may provide missing information or necessary facts. Questions beginning with "why" may be quite enlightening, but must be articulated with care since they are often perceived to accuse or place blame.

Reviewers must remember that often there is no right or wrong response to questions they ask. Each response has a place, with one being more appropriate than another given the set of circumstances. Reviewers would do well to think about staff responses along a continuum of options. As information is gathered, reviewers should pay particular attention to the disconnects—those things that do not quite make sense or that might (should) be done differently (or not at all).

SHARING FEEDBACK

Communicating feedback to others can be very stressful—for both reviewer and museum staff. It requires sincerity, professionalism, and diplomacy. It requires that reviewers be honest without breaking the trust established with staff. Remember that a defensive listener is a poor listener!

Shared feedback should be fair and avoid bias. It should focus on facts and what was really observed, avoiding inferences and judgments. Feedback framed in relation to doing "more or less" of something removes it from the realm of being right or wrong and moves it along a continuum of possibilities. Feedback should stimulate museum staff to explore alternatives and select the one they believe to be most appropriate for their setting. Share it in a private environment with those who have both the responsibility and the authority to take further action, allowing

it to be perceived as an offer not an imposition.

Be aware that excessive feedback can overwhelm while too little can minimize the importance of the message. Present feedback in discreet categories such as areas of strength, growth, or mandated change. Specificity, along with the reviewer's expression of confidence that museum staff can make necessary changes, is key to effective feedback.

Effective communicators demonstrate empathy for others. By recognizing and relating to defensive/stressful feelings that staff may have during site visits, the reviewer can take extra care in choosing just the right words at the right time. Keeping feedback balanced demonstrates fairness and objectivity.

Use of positive language can be an effective way to communicate, although reviewers need to take care that the message is not completely lost. Phrases can be used such as "We have identified areas of opportunity that will strengthen. . ." or "standards require that. . ." can be used. Very few things are "either/or." As a reviewer, seek out comments that are "both/and."

SUMMARY

It is your responsibility, as a reviewer in the Museum Assessment and Accreditation programs, to establish realistic expectations for the museum staff, to share professional feedback based on knowledge and mutual respect, to treat those around the table as partners not adversaries. And, it is your responsibility to make the site visit as educational, efficient, and meaningful as possible. Effective communication lies at the core of these responsibilities. ■

Welcome to My Place

Debby Ellen Moone, Development Officer, National Museum of Civil War Medicine

The National Museum of Civil War Medicine (NMCWM) in Frederick, MD, probably holds the record for hosting the most site visits by peer reviewers within a five-year period. Between June 1997 and June 2002, the NMCWM welcomed peer reviewers for the Institutional Assessment (1997), Public Dimension Assessment (1999), Governance Pilot Site (2001), and Accreditation (2002). The NMCWM also hosted peer reviewers in 1997 for the Conservation

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Assessment Program. As NMCWM coordinator for these programs, I can offer insight into the process from the perspective of a much visited museum.

The NMCWM opened its doors to the public in 1994. At that time, its staff consisted of a paid executive director, a paid (part-time) administrative assistant, and a small group of dedicated volunteers.

In August 1996 JaNeen Smith became executive director. There were two things Ms. Smith insisted on before accepting the position: that the board of trustees raise the funds to hire at least four full-time staff members and that the board be fully supportive of the museum's participation in AAM's Museum Assessment and Accreditation

programs. Fortunately, the board agreed to meet both of Ms. Smith's "demands."

I know I speak for the rest of the museum's staff as well as its board of trustees when I say the Museum Assessment Program is a priceless tool for institutions to use in achieving excellence in all of their operations. The NMCWM owes its success, in large part, to this program, and we cannot praise it enough.

The self-study process is extremely beneficial and allowed the staff and board to critically analyze their activities. This resulted in a redirection of the museum's resources to the areas most needing improvement. The visits by our peer reviewers, however, were certainly the most rewarding part of MAP.

Each of the peer reviewers did an outstanding job. They immediately established rapport with board and staff (both paid and volunteer) and demonstrated superb listening skills. They asked relevant questions, freely praised what we were doing well, and provided extremely constructive critique in areas where improvement was needed.

Before our first MAP experience, some board members and staff felt apprehensive about the pending visit by our peer reviewer. They were nervous that the reviewer was going to be performing an inspection. The executive director and I assured them that the peer reviewer was not an inspector but instead was a museum professional who was coming to help us meet our goal (Accreditation) by evaluating our activities and offering

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