

Case Study Response

By Wyona Lynch-McWhite



Micah Parzen uses his personal and professional experiences to transform his institution. While many skills are used, Parzen seems to model strategic agility, the ability to get personal, and to effectively communicate with various stakeholders. The ultimate decision to cancel the *Border Crossing* project connects with systems leadership. It resonates with any leader who has invested in a project with this type of collective leadership that seems to become uncontrollable. The various elements presented in this case study resonate with my past experiences, as so much of our current work (as museum leaders) is truly collaborative. The transformation of SDMoM's exhibition strategy and ultimately its mission was a process that evolved over several years. Parzen is simultaneously working on developing these new strategies, building collaborative partnerships, and communicating with the museum's internal and external communities.

This connects with my work (on a much smaller scale) to celebrate Fruitlands Centennial in 2014–15 at the Fruitlands Museum, in Harvard,

Massachusetts, where I served as executive director. While I had a museum background to help guide my efforts, Fruitlands had a past scandal and history of bad press, along with little or no future exhibition or strategic planning. Many collaborators wanted to be a part of the centennial. An array of proposals emerged for exhibitions, lectures, theatrical productions, concerts, and community events that were far bigger than the financial resources and planning timelines available when I arrived at the museum in 2012.

Strategic agility is the key for every leader and in that way, previous experience is no substitute for continuous learning. Just as Parzen had to understand his institution's past history while working to shape strategic direction moving forward, I had to quickly understand what my institution needed while working to develop plans. This process is most successful when you are able to communicate your efforts and are willing to engage in dialogue with potential partners.

The many meetings that I had with staff members, community leaders, and board committees did not always lead to a new initiative for the centennial. But the process of having these meetings, infused with an open spirit, helped develop the final twelve months of programming that were ultimately presented. Communication is not always harmonious with agreement, but it is essential for understanding. When we were not able to move forward with an

initiative, there was understanding around the decision. In our case, it was the theatrical productions and community events that focused on literature, which is a historical theme within our museum programming but not the centennial's focus. I found it personally difficult to not be able to move forward with a project that was beloved but impractical.

Our centennial celebration had four key goals. Each project had to support at least two of those goals or it didn't have the ROI (return on investment) we were striving for. Some of the metrics we used to measure the success of our efforts were the number of members, annual visitors, number of donors, and number of programs. These measures were quantifiable, but the overarching metric was a qualitative one around how people "felt" about the institution. A significant amount of work went into these efforts. The result of my leadership and our planning was a more dynamic and nimble institution.

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