

# MPMA Session Summary

Editor's Note: MPMA members often ask for summaries of sessions held at its annual conference. Our thanks to Art Wolf, session organizer and moderator, and to session presenters Lorne Render and Ed Pauley for providing a summary of their session held this past fall in Omaha.

## Taking Care of #1: Professional Development and Renewal for the Director/CEO

When funds are tight many institutions spend their professional development budgets on entry level and junior staff while ignoring their most expensive and hard to replace human resource – the executive. Museums that do care about the continuing professional development of their directors now have many options. A session at the 2005 Mountain Plains Museums Association meeting in Omaha explored some ways to combat burnout and enhance personal and professional effectiveness. The presenters offered both personal and institutional views, which are summarized here with their permission.

### Presenter #1

#### *Taking Care of Oneself: Four Factors to Consider*

**Lorne E. Render**, Director,  
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What professional development and renewal opportunities are there available for directors? What can we do to take care of #1, to combat burnout, to enhance effectiveness? A quick survey of the literature, and that all knowing source google.com, shows there is indeed a wealth of courses, seminars, workshops, and programs a director can pursue for personal and professional development (I found well over 1 million Google entries just for professional development programs available to art museum directors). However, before you select any option, I would suggest that you consider four factors.

#### **First, one has to pause from his/her normal course of work and think about his/herself.**

If we wait until burn-out, the only option seems to be to find another job or, worse, leave the field. We must take the time on at least an annual basis to see where we are with our energy level at work. This must be a frank and in-depth personal inspection. I am not talking about the annual performance evaluation, although that may be part of the process. We all too often continue to think that we are effective, while in fact we are not performing at our best level or fully enjoying our work. Indeed, we may be having a negative

impact on our job, our health, and those around us. If you have difficulty doing a self assessment, I encourage you to seek professional assistance from a source with which you are comfortable. We must come to the realization that job-health and professional development are integral parts of our work and life.

**Second, a work environment that recognizes the importance of professional development and that nurtures and encourages staff, including directors, to participate, is necessary.** It must be a full part of the institutional culture. In such an environment, directors will be able to undertake professional and personal development with confidence that the institutional infrastructure will provide support for him/her, for staff, for the board, and for the institution. Within this context one needs to consider: Financial support – namely does our salary continue? Is there an institutional endorsement of a professional development program? Is there consideration for allocation of resources including funding or other types of support for staff who will undertake additional responsibilities during the director's absence? Is there a staff and board orientation session on issues, parameters, and procedures that will be in effect during the director's absence? When a director goes on a professional development leave, it is, for want of a better word, "comforting" to know board, staff, and volunteers are taken care of. Daily emails are certainly not the answer.

**Third, there has to be board support for professional leaves.** A key first step is to develop, with the board, an institutional policy on professional development. A policy should consider such issues as: length of service, purpose for leave, time in the museum calendar when a leave is to take place, length of the leave, what salary and benefits will be provided during a leave. And, will tuition, fees, or other expenses be covered? Will there be reimbursement of funds to the institution if the director resigns before a specific time after returning from a leave? Is a report to be submitted after a leave? Are there any other specific institutional issues? Having a policy in place will provide a starting point for discussion between the board and director, rather than having a request made without any institutional context.

**And lastly, professional development should be looked at as a selfish act.** A director needs freedom of choice. Professional development opportunities should be selected that will energize, motivate, bring new ideas to the institution, increase skills, expand knowledge, and allow a director to return to work refreshed. There are excellent programs and a personalized one can be developed to address specific management and museum issues. However, I would like to suggest that we also think outside the box. For instance, what got us interested in museum work in the first place and how can we reconnect with that earlier enthusiasm/idealism? Do we need another course on long range planning or a four week ceramic course? Do we need another course on team work or to volunteer for a period of time at another non-profit organization that is not museum related? Do we need a seminar on copyright issues or to spend a month working in a for-profit company to see what relates to our institution? Do we need a workshop on conservation standards or to bike across Nebraska looking at the land, visiting historic sites, and talking to people about their history? Do we need a session on computer technology or do we need to learn yoga? While some of these ideas may not seem to relate to a director's job, I would suggest they may be exactly what we need in order to slow down and combat burnout in our jobs. We will then, indeed, be more effective and take care of #1.

### Presenter #2

#### *Looking Out for Number One: The Directors Roundtable*

**Edward E. Pauley**, President/CEO,  
Plains Art Museum, [epauley@plainsart.org](mailto:epauley@plainsart.org)

"It's lonely at the top" is a familiar maxim intended to encapsulate a common condition of leadership. One conjures up an image of a solitary and heroic figure at the pinnacle of their career. In truth, leaders often find themselves somewhere in the middle instead of at the top. Certainly, the museum director operates inside a void between the organization's governing board and staff. A contemporary of neither group, the executive may feel isolated and needing to interface with peers.

This is not a plea for sympathy but rather an acknowledgment of reality. Directors are driven personalities who want to be successful leaders. They are where they are by choice and the majority of them feel fortunate to have reached that career milestone.

However, by design (the organizational structure) it is rare that anyone else connected with the organization shares the director's unique perspective. Directors are hired because they fill the leadership void. The museum gains a unique person who is likely to be a big-picture visionary. Consequently, the person in charge must consider looking outside of their own organization for open, honest, and experience-based input.

One option is joining a roundtable group. Museum director's roundtables provide ideal forums for chief executives to exchange ideals and experiences. Membership is exclusive and therefore, only directors can belong to a directors' roundtable.

I have belonged to two roundtables. Both were organized and are led by a Washington DC based consultant group known as Qm<sup>2</sup>. They have established regional museum director's roundtables across the United States. I moved from the New England group to join Qm<sup>2</sup>'s newly formed Midwest group, which is logistically more convenient since it meets in Chicago.

The meetings are structured and are led by facilitators who have comprehensive knowledge and prior museum and/or nonprofit experience. Roundtables are small and meet three times a year with each meeting lasting one and a half days. Members are expected to attend all sessions. Informal discussion among peers, with guidance from the facilitators, solidifies the group dynamic.

Trust is the key to a roundtable's success. Every member must feel secure that matters discussed during a meeting remain confidential. In essence, this assurance creates an atmosphere where directors can freely express themselves. Consequently, in-depth strategizing is encouraged with the aim of developing more effective leadership.

Although Qm<sup>2</sup> roundtable members are clustered by geographic region, great care is taken not to invite competitors or close collaborators. This principle allows participants to speak openly without fear of offending someone.

Mutual respect is another ground rule for the members of the peer group. Respect supersedes politeness. This quality is defined by involvement. All are expected to come prepared and to bring something to the table. Roundtable members are dependent on each other. In turn, the ties of friendship in addition to professional regard are strengthened.

Roundtable agenda items are holistic and focus on three primary areas, which include director's issues, leadership and management development, and reinventing the museum.

Each director's range of interest varies greatly. The role of the peer group is to candidly analyze issues pertinent to the director's position. Topics regarding staff and board evaluations, strategic planning, audience development, and operating budgets are classic content. Beyond being a mere sounding board, the roundtable's objective includes providing responsive support and alternative approaches to resolving problems.

Leaders may or may not be born. Regardless, personal growth through the honing of leadership and management skills is essential to being a successful director. Simply put, good directors are good students. They realize that responsible leaders embrace and implement change. The roundtable is an excellent venue for learning time-tested as well as innovative techniques. Subject matter might include discovering one's management style, running constructive meetings, organizational structure, and so on.

If museums are going to survive, they must constantly reinvent themselves. During the course of my lifetime the enduring institutions have not been inert operations. The museums of my childhood would have little appeal to today's society had they not evolved. Directors need to understand and be receptive to the

communities their museums serve. Awareness of current social trends can help directors envision and prepare their institutions for transition.

Discussions of these and other hot topics are typical when roundtable members gather. However, the benefits of membership reach beyond the meeting format. Qm<sup>2</sup> consultants and roundtable members are available year round in the event an urgent matter arises. Communication via email addressing individual and broader director issues is ongoing. On occasion, conference calls are arranged. During American Association of Museums annual meetings, Qm<sup>2</sup> facilitators and a meeting space are available to roundtable directors and their staffs.

Well informed leaders made decisions and guide their organizations with greater confidence. The void in which a director performs his or her duties doesn't have to be a trap. The biggest barrier for many museums is the cost of employee development. Therefore, it is paramount that funds are budgeted to support the director's quest for personal and professional development. Looking out for number one means looking out for the museum one directs.

For further information visit Qm<sup>2</sup>'s website at [Qm2.org](http://Qm2.org).

Topics covered in the Q&A at the end of the session included business coaches, job sharing, roundtables, kayaking, cooking, travel, exercise, and other topics of interest to directors. An impromptu survey revealed that many in the audience had been directors for more than ten years, few had learning experiences outside of conferences in the past two years, some are still active in their original disciplines, very few get sabbaticals, and many had been to seminars such as Williamsburg, Winedale, the Getty or others.

**Report compiled by Session Organizer and Moderator**

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