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Intentional Practice

A Way of Thinking, A Way of Working

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Intentional practice—first as a concept and then as a way of working—emerged from reflecting on observations of individual museums' organizational practices, my experiences as a staff member at numerous museums, and nearly three decades of working as an evaluation consultant in all types of museums—from art museums to zoos.¹ Intentional practice became an idea of necessity in response to three primary observations: (1) seeing that staff conceived of evaluation as a linear, episodic event; (2) seeing that staff also conceived of their project work as linear events, usually disconnected from past projects; and (3) seeing that individuals tended to work independently or within their departmental boundaries rather than collaboratively or across departments. These three linear and disconnected organizational behaviors intersect. Even for museums that conducted evaluations repeatedly, evaluation results were neither discussed, nor shared, nor applied to future projects. Learning from one's work was of little interest, almost as if there was not anything to be learned, and even though people work for the same organization, staff may view the work that happens in one department as unrelated to work in other departments.

Operating as if one's work—evaluation *and* projects—is disconnected, and not working collaboratively with colleagues who are in the same organization leads to a stagnant learning environment and a broken system that tends to foster an organization that hobbles along from one project to the next without a unified purpose. What if a museum were to adopt a systems thinking approach—a holistic mindset in which its projects were viewed along a continuum and part of a network of projects all serving a particular end? And, what if departments across the organization were operating as an organic system, unified in their common cause? And finally, what if staff collectively took time to reflect on and discuss their practice and evaluation results? Such a museum would be working collaboratively, learning continuously,

moving forward with momentum, and possibly achieving desired results. This portrayal well describes an organization that is pursuing intentional practice; it also describes a highly functioning system comprised of interconnected and interdependent parts.

Intentional practice is a holistic way of thinking² and an approach to work focused on achieving intentions. It is one strategy of several that a museum can apply to achieve impact in its community. Intentional practice, like systems thinking, is a whole-organization approach to doing the work of a museum (or any other non-profit). As with any approach to work, there are basic principles that collectively constitute intentional practice:

1. The organization wants to achieve something greater than itself (e.g., impact) for the benefit of the audiences it serves;
2. Staff articulate and know the impact the museum hopes to achieve on audiences;
3. Staff align work to achieve the museum's intended impact;
4. Staff regularly evaluate the effect the museum is having against what they hope to achieve, in order to learn and improve;
5. Staff reflect on their museum practice and evaluation data, and apply learnings to future work;
6. Staff work collaboratively across and up and down the organization; and
7. Staff use inquiry and active listening to understand and appreciate varying viewpoints and to learn.

INTENTIONAL PRACTICE IS AN EVOLVING WAY OF WORKING

Intentional practice has changed a great deal over the course of a decade, and it will continue to change because I will always be applying what I learn to refine the concept and how I practice it. In its current state, intentional practice includes four action quadrants (plan, align, evaluate, and reflect) situated around a nucleus—impact (see figure 5.1). These five elements connect to and are dependent on each other, and together they comprise an idealized system of work.

Intentional practice means that a highly functioning system—the organization—is working around the nucleus and across the quadrants as staff focus on the intended impact and outcomes the museum wants to achieve among target audiences. Working from the nucleus and through the quadrants of intentional practice should not be considered add-on work for staff; it is the *only* work for staff. Such focus and intensity are necessary because without an unwavering focus from the organization's leadership and staff, intended impact is not likely to happen.

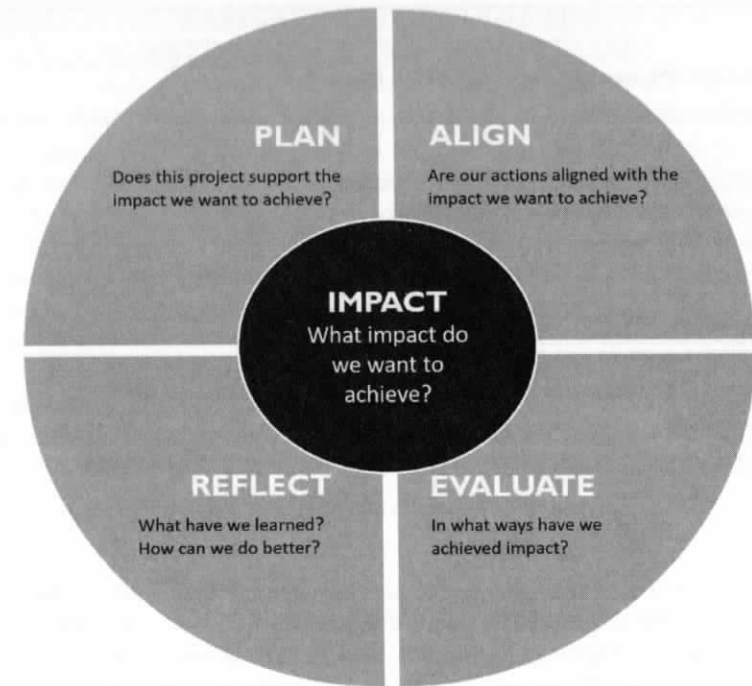


Figure 5.1. Cycle of Intentional Practice. Source: Author.

Having a unified purpose or impact statement is a prerequisite for a museum pursuing intentional practice. Museums that do not have an impact statement with supporting outcomes to serve as guideposts for their work run the risk of becoming lost and rudderless. (Figure 5.2, the Impact Pyramid, illustrates the relationship among the impact statement, outcomes, and indicators.) Stephen Weil³ wrote about and was a proponent of museums clarifying their purpose, and he suggested that museums adopt as their own the United Way of America's cornerstone "to make a positive difference in the quality of people's lives."⁴ He asked, "Will any difference do, or is it only intended differences with which we are concerned?" He concluded,

In terms of accountability, it must surely be the latter. A museum's program . . . may produce a range of outcomes, both intended and unintended. Nevertheless, the core question of positive accountability—in carrying out its program, has this organization made effective use of its resources?—can only be answered in terms of the program's *intended* consequences. . . . The good museum is one that is operated with a clearly formulated purpose, described in terms of these particular and positive outcomes that it hopes and expects to achieve.⁵

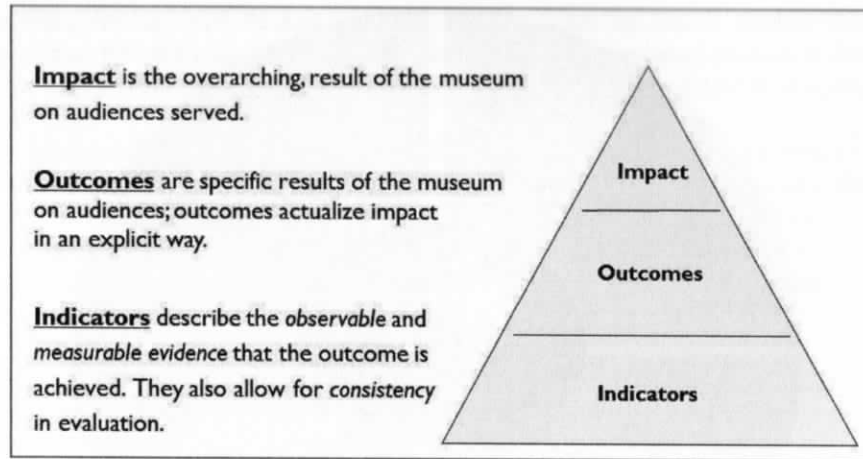


Figure 5.2. Impact Pyramid. Source: Author.

Without an impact statement and associated outcomes that describe what the organization wants to achieve among audiences, the organization cannot move forward with purposeful work. An impact statement is a one-sentence statement that melds three vital concepts: (1) the collective passion of staff—why they do what they do; (2) distinctive qualities of the museum—what the museum is best at; and (3) what is relevant to its public (which may require conducting evaluation and research), so the museum can make a positive difference in people’s lives. To generate an impact statement and outcomes, leadership and staff collectively explore and discuss the above three ideas in facilitated exercises. Though this work is challenging (because it requires consensus building and negotiation), it is also highly invigorating and inspiring for leadership and staff to be operating as one.

Below is an impact statement shown with the museum’s mission statement. Mission statements describe what a museum does, and impact statements describe the result of what the museum does on audiences served. Mission and impact statements are complementary, companion statements. Mission statements usually begin with the name of the museum and are about the work of the museum; impact statements usually begin with “visitors” or “audiences,” and they are about the recipients of the museum’s work.

Mission statement:

The mission of the Morgan Library & Museum is to preserve, build, study, present, and interpret a collection of extraordinary quality, in order to stimulate enjoyment, excite the imagination, advance learning, and nurture creativity.

Impact statement:

Visitors feel intimately engaged with creative expression and the history of ideas.

NAVIGATING THROUGH THE INTENTIONAL PRACTICE SYSTEM

With an impact statement in hand, organizations will be able to make decisions about future projects, remembering that all projects should connect to the impact and outcomes the museum wants to achieve. An organization can start with any of the intentional practice quadrants and it can move between quadrants in any order; however, most museums start with the plan quadrant or evaluate quadrant out of need because they do not know their audience beyond demographics, and sometimes a museum will address both quadrants simultaneously. While there are four distinct parts or processes around the nucleus that comprise intentional practice, these parts are not mutually exclusive; staff can align while planning, evaluate while planning, and can and should regularly reflect on their practice and evaluation data. When a museum internalizes intentional practice, leadership and staff are working simultaneously toward one end and they are using the impact statement that they have collectively articulated to guide their work and decisions.

Plan

In the plan quadrant, staff use the impact statement to analyze, vet, and scrutinize existing and new project ideas. An impact statement can also guide decision making during difficult times; for example, the Reynolda House and Museum of American Art in North Carolina used its impact statement to guide budget planning during a recent recession. An obvious question is: “Does this project/program support the impact we want to achieve?” Finer questions are about who the target audience is and whether the project accentuates the organization’s distinct qualities (see the list of vetting questions below). Staff should be able to demonstrate effortlessly how a project is directly related to some of the intended outcomes that staff identified during the development of the impact statement, and staff should also recognize the courage it takes to turn projects away; museums excel at saying “yes” and do poorly at saying “no.” The vetting questions invite staff to thoughtfully and honestly discuss traditional and new projects in the context of the impact statement, the museum’s distinct qualities, target audiences, and intended outcomes for those targeted audiences so staff can determine what new work the museum should accept and what work the museum should decline (or stop doing). An impact statement can provide executive directors, for example, with the courage to say “no” to requests that fall outside the museum’s intended impact. For example, the then director at the Baltimore Museum of Art, who also used an impact statement to guide her decisions, looked at the impact statement above her desk and knew she had a strong rationale for her decision!

Vetting Questions

1. Audience: Who is the target audience? Which aspects of the project strongly align with the target audience? Which do not?

2. **Mission/Impact/Outcomes:** Does the project support mission *and* impact? How so? Which specific outcomes does the project support?
3. **Distinct Qualities:** Does the project accentuate three or more of the museum's distinct qualities? Which ones and in what ways?
4. **Resources:** Does the funding environment accommodate resource needs? Does it require new resources or resource realignment? If there is a gap, how will you address it?
5. **Staff:** Does the project require additional staff or staff realignment? Which staff need to be directly involved?

Evaluate

A museum might start with the evaluate quadrant because it needs to learn about its visitors; knowing about visitors can suggest how to best engage visitors. Sometimes visitors are studied without framing it as an evaluation (e.g., basic audience research); other times studies are conducted to determine the ways in which an exhibition or program is achieving what it sets out to achieve (e.g., impact and outcomes). Traditionally, evaluation systematically collects information from users and examines users' program experiences against what staff wanted to achieve. For intentional practice, evaluation is raised from the program level to the institutional level, whereby the evaluation would be designed to study the ways in which the *whole museum* is achieving what it set out to achieve. Thinking about the whole museum is akin to applying a systems thinking approach to work. The gauge for success is the outcomes and impact evaluation. Impact evaluation uses more complex data collection tools and analysis strategies than those used to evaluate stand-alone programs or exhibitions. For example, impact evaluation, by necessity, might include collecting data from a range of populations such as members, onsite visitors, educators, community leaders, etc., using qualitative and quantitative methods to enable data triangulation.

Reflect

Reflection is about personal and organizational learning,⁶ and such learning is not likely to happen unless people take dedicated time to think about their work, their museum, and what evaluation data say about both. And a museum doesn't necessarily need data to reflect; it is possible and even advisable to reflect on your museum's practice with colleagues. While internal collaboration is expected for any museum that pursues intentional practice, convening staff from up, down, and across the museum is vital for reflection because of the power of group sharing and learning, given the different perspectives that comprise the whole museum. Because the most significant barrier to organizational reflection is lack of time, the trick is to build new habits that will force the issue—like repurposing one weekly staff meeting a month to facilitate reflection rather than review who is doing what.

Or once a month hold a brown bag gathering during lunch for the sole purpose of reflecting on a recently completed project or program. Any effort that promotes staff learning from each other about their work will begin to build a culture of learning where asking questions and exploring options becomes welcome and commonplace.

Align

So that leaves the align quadrant, the most difficult quadrant for a museum to tackle. Once the museum has an impact statement and supporting outcomes, it then makes sense to ask, how can we align our work so visitors have the kinds of experiences we envision? Only the most courageous museums do this part of intentional practice work. So why is the "Align" quadrant so difficult? There are a few reasons:

1. The alignment questions listed below ask staff to look at their actions and resources in relationship to the impact they would like to achieve. If a museum has gone through the hard work of clarifying impact and specifying outcomes for particular audiences, then it should look at all its programs and projects to determine those that achieve their intended impact and those that do not. A museum could stop ineffective programs, thereby freeing resources to either change existing programs or create new ones that more strongly align with the impact the museum wants to achieve.⁷ Herein lies the problem: changing personal and organizational behavior is hard because people really do not want to change; they like things just the way they are. When I ask a museum why it does things in the way it does them, the answer is usually, "because we have always done them that way."

Alignment Questions

- a. **Target Audiences:** Which target audiences do current exhibitions, programs, and initiatives accommodate? Which target audiences are overlooked? Which exhibitions, programs, and initiatives may need to be changed to better accommodate target audiences?
- b. **Impact and Outcomes:** Does X exhibition/program/initiative support achieving the museum's impact and outcomes? Specifically, which exhibition/program/initiative elements support achieving impact and outcomes? Which program elements do not support achieving the museum's impact and outcomes? Which elements can be strengthened, and in what ways, to support achieving museum's impact and outcomes?
- c. **Distinct Qualities:** Does X program accentuate three or more of the museum's distinct qualities? Which ones and in what ways? Are there ways to strengthen how the distinct qualities are accentuated in X program? Are there other distinct qualities that X program could accentuate?

- d. Resources: How is program X funded? Does it require extra resources or resource realignment? Are resources expended worth the level of impact potentially achieved?
 - e. Staff: Does program X require extra staffing? Is staff time worth the level of impact potentially achieved?
2. Even though people avoid change, accepting change becomes okay when a museum chooses to take on a new initiative. For some reason it is easier to continue adding more and more onto people's workloads while never taking anything away—as if every new initiative supports the impact the museum wants to achieve. This idea of always adding more work is not sustainable—in terms of staff capacity—but I think I know why it is easier for museums to add more work than take away work. Workload is associated with how museums measure success; traditionally, success is tangled up with how big and how many. For example, when programming staff are reviewed, one metric is the number of programs that were produced; another is the number of people who attended. Numbers have always been the markers of success; however, one can reasonably argue that numbers no longer suffice as the key success metric because attendance figures, for example, only mean that people came—they offer no indication of meaningfulness. The same holds true for the quantity of programs a museum produces—the quality of a program may not be discussed because quantity often trumps quality. At some point someone will ask, "So what difference has the museum made in the quality of life in your community?" In this chapter, achievement of impact is more about measuring quality than quantity. That is not to say that quantity is unimportant, and that there haven't been quality programs that also attracted high quantities of people. Numbers have a purpose, but they may become more meaningful once the qualitative value of an organization is articulated by those who are affected, which can happen through research and evaluation.
 3. When staff are asked to plot their work on a resource-impact grid where there is high and low impact on one axis and high and low resources on another, staff invariably plot their programs as having high impact and using low resources. If all museum programs used as few resources and had as high impact as staff led themselves and others to believe, then there would be nothing more to learn about museum practice—because the field has already reached nirvana. Weil noticed and wrote about this phenomenon, too: "To some extent, our almost congenital avoidance of open references to bad museums may simply rest on an understandably collegial and even sympathetic desire to protect one another."⁸

Because the align quadrant is intertwined with the evaluate quadrant and traditional metrics of success, and the align quadrant requires that staff accurately and honestly represent the quality of their work, the align quadrant receives little attention. If a museum wants to pursue intentional practice, organizational change is

inevitable. So how can a museum address alignment or break illogical work habits? Because it is always easy for the human mind to rationalize, honesty is needed to pursue intentional practice, and alignment in particular. Staff will need to examine which projects might have high impact and which might have low impact so they can determine which exhibitions, programs, and initiatives need revising and which should be discarded.

IMPLEMENTING INTENTIONAL PRACTICE

How a museum pursues intentional practice is central to the success of intentional practice. First, collaboration across and up and down the organization (leadership and staff) is essential. Inclusivity and collaboration are vital; organizational intentions are far more difficult to attain when staff operate independently toward disparate ends. Collaboration may need to be cultivated if the culture of the organization does not have a congenial networking infrastructure in place. Leadership, openness, courage, and trust are just a few organizational characteristics needed to begin building a museum-wide collaborative infrastructure. All staff will need to become knowledgeable about the work of their colleagues across the museum so they can begin constructing and strengthening pathways toward achieving impact. Leadership, too, will need to become knowledgeable about the museum's work. If the museum is building a collaborative infrastructure from the ground up and top down, it will need to use an effective communication strategy.

Communication is associated with how information and ideas are exchanged, and in the case of collaborative work, expert facilitation is needed to bring people together toward a common goal. Inquiry, or asking questions, is a highly effective facilitation strategy for all intentional practice work; asking questions serves to neutralize and democratize situations. It is through asking questions that an individual gains awareness, clarity, and deeper levels of appreciation and understanding of others' points of view. Inquiry also leads to dialogue, and dialogue is the primary way that people learn." Some believe that "not asking questions leads to action without thought,"¹⁰ and as museums pursue intentional practice, thoughtful actions are central. Preskill and Torres also note: "consistent and ongoing questioning about the practices, processes, and outcomes of our work stimulates continuous learning, a sense of connectedness, and improved individual, team, and organizational performance."¹¹

As museums struggle to be viewed as important and relevant institutions, they may need to engage in two seemingly divergent actions—searching within their institutional selves and exploring what might be relevant to their communities. Once they find the commonalities, they can then realign their work to accommodate both. If a museum chooses to do such work, its efforts will be rewarded by becoming an organization that values and practices a continuous cycle of learning; it will also become an organization that is functioning with passion and integrity—two attributes visitors and museum professionals are apt to recognize and respect.

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NOTES

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2. Randi Korn, "Creating Public Value through Intentional Practice," in *Museums and Public Value: Creating Sustainable Futures*, ed. Carol A. Scott (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 31–44.
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4. Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 60.
5. *Ibid.*, 61–62.
6. Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).
7. Stephen Weil, "A Success/Failure Matrix for Museums," *Museum News* 84, no. 1 (2002): 36–40.
8. *Ibid.*, 58.
9. Joshua Gurwill and Sue Allen, *Group Inquiry at Science Museum Exhibits* (San Francisco: Exploratorium, 2010); Gaea Leinhardt, Kevin Crowley, and Karen Knutson, *Learning Conversations in Museums* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002).
10. Hallie Preskill and Rosalie T. Torres, *Evaluative Inquiry for Learning in Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), 61.
11. *Ibid.*, 65–66.