

Taking the Helm: Becoming a Museum CEO

Brett Mason puts to good use his valuable experience at a high-powered American course designed to launch novice museum directors successfully as they take up their new responsibilities

In early August I was contacted by The Getty Leadership Institute, based in Los Angeles, with an offer to attend its inaugural programme for new directors (*figure 1*). The course was set up as an enhancement on their well-established Museum Leadership Institute course, with its focus on the first six months in the new role. Supported by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Board members of the Wellington Museums Trust, I decided to apply, and was successful in both getting in and receiving a scholarship to attend.

GETTING TO FIRST BASE

Prior to the course participants (18 from across the US, Canada and Germany) provided the Getty with a number of key issues being faced within our institutions as well as any concerns we had regarding our own leadership skills and style. This information helped to establish what groups we were to be put in for our breakfast session (more about that later). We also completed an online survey that asked questions regarding our decision-making and leadership style that gave a general idea of where the group was in the context of leadership qualities.

The list of participants was formidable (and included the newly appointed director of the Auckland Museum, Dr Vanda Vitali (*figure 2*)) and I shall admit to a queasy feeling of apprehension: how could I fit into such an illustrious group of well-rounded, academically trained high achievers? I didn't need to worry! It immediately became apparent we were all coming from the same place with very similar issues and with related, but by no

Figure 1. **Brett Mason (right) debates with Julien Chapuis (new Director of the Bode Museum in Berlin). In the background are James Pepper Henry (new Director of the Anchorage Museum) and Mary Davis Smart (Director of the Charlotte Museum of History).** ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: BART BARTHOLOMEW, 2007



means identical, concerns about the step up. For me it was a case of being appointed from within a Museum that I had been with for five years; for some it was a mixture of new appointments sometimes with past associations, while others were new to the museum world. Some were already in their roles. I was the most established, but the majority had either only just started or were yet to start.

CHARTING THE COURSE

The course was led by Phil Nowlen, who had steered the MLI for just over 20 years, and it was mostly taught by Kent John Chabotar (financial management), and two former Harvard Business School professors, Michael Watkins (strategic management) and Laura Nash (on work/life balance). They were assisted by museum directors from across the United States who worked alongside us for a number of days but also presented case studies for us to work on. The directors were Derek Gillman of the Barnes Foundation (his previous roles included Deputy Director of the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne), Charmaine Jefferson (California African American Museum), President and CEO of the Please Touch Museum in Philadelphia Nancy D Kolb, Deborah Marrow Director of the Getty Foundation (who had been interim President and CEO of the Getty Trust), David Mickenberg Director of the Davis Museum and Cultural Centre and Nancy Stueber the President of the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry.

The course ran for six days, with the first afternoon including a session run by Nowlen on how to begin your new role by establishing your opening shot, as in the sense of introducing yourself in as positive and dynamic a way as possible. This was quite fun and actually has stuck with me as a very useful way of making sure you are remembered. It was followed with a shorthand budget and statement reading session run by Chabotar. Then it was the first of some rather good meals enjoyed in the private Getty dining room with great views, excellent company, exquisite food and wine.

DAYS OF ACTION

Each day began with a breakfast meeting at 8am where we worked in Peer Advisory panels led by Laura Nash. For these panels we discussed in groups of four advice on the personal leadership issues we each faced. These five morning sessions culminated in presenting our plan on how we would approach the issues on our return. I had a great group: Terese Zilke, California State Parks Director of the Capitol State Museum and the Governor's



Figure 2. **Dr. Vanda Vitali (right) (Executive Director of Auckland Museum) talks to the Getty Institute's MiJin Hong.** ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: BART BARTHOLOMEW, 2007

Mansion (and a peace officer to boot!); Rachel Teagle the Executive Director of the yet to be opened Art Museum for Children in San Diego (both these institutions have been terribly affected by the recent Southern California fires) and James Pepper Henry the new Director of the Anchorage Museum (previously an Associate Director of the National Museum of the American Indian). It was amazing to find that despite each of us coming from very different disciplines, we had similar issues and concerns.

The first full day was spent diving into the murky depths of financial management with Chabotar and his quirky but effective style. One of my favourite lines from him was 'Where there is a will you want to be in it!' He would prance about the room and slide his way to you with a question just to check you were listening. Tricky to hide from but we covered such an essential area of our role that you just knew you needed to keep up. Although much of what he covered was for the American audience there was enough there to make it worthwhile for me too (making our financial manager wary of me ever since).

Days Three and Four were run by Michael Watkins, whose book *The First 90 Days* is on the New York Times bestseller list. This was the most intense session and is possibly the most difficult to evaluate. Watkins was a very forceful tutor and needed to cover a lot of ground over the two days. Sometimes his examples were not the most appropriate to our industry where we are mostly non-profit and this was a shame as many of the areas he covered in his 'Critical Success Strategies for New CEOs' were valuable. I hope this is one area that the Getty can improve on in assessing the success of the course. Nonetheless Watkins added a very strong business

dimension to the course that is useful back in the real world. Furthermore his general focus on using your first months in a new role to take the time to diagnose carefully and thoughtfully the 'business' is sensible and effective.

For the fifth day we had what for me was the real meat of the course, with the seasoned museum directors talking to What I wish I had done, What I'm sorry I did. This started to put context into what we had been covering in the previous days and allowed us to talk closely with a rather hard-case bunch of hugely experienced, smart professionals. Their case studies were frequently straight out of left field, but all were real examples that they brought from their own time in different director roles. What they underlined was that, no matter how much you believe that you can prepare for certain situations, the unexpected is still just as likely to happen. These directors' real examples illuminated ethics, professionalism and relationships with stakeholders and boards and gave me a sense of how fine the line is between success and failure.

PREPARING FOR RE-ENTRY

Laura Nash took on the last day, which must have been quite hard work. By then we were all starting to feel the pressure cooker nature of the week and were not nearly as enthusiastic as we had been. Nash's session went under the title of 'Lasting Success for Leadership and Life' and set out to give us ways to prioritize what is important to us in both our professional and personal lives. It was reinforced by her very readable book *Just Enough*, which I highly recommend for its focus on the ever-growing difficulty of achieving a balance between the expectations of working life and our own needs to live a rounded, healthy relationship-bound life away from work.

The success of the course for me was a matter of confidence. I went to the Getty unsure of where I sat within a museum industry that values so highly people that have moved up from within. Directors more often than not are ex-curators or specialists in a museum field such as history or art history or some other related area, whereas I come from an eclectic work history which includes stints as a street performer and actor, a postman, a house painter, training in publishing and moves into arts administration and arts marketing before taking on museum public programming and curatorial work – in essence a cultural worker. Now I can reflect on the significance of this variety and I fully appreciate what I bring to the table, confident that my experience is

valuable and valued. It also means I understand my role as a leader of an institution with a more rounded vision.

On my return to Wellington I was at a meeting with the CEO of our Trust trying to nut out a problem we had had for over twelve months. It was one of those political hot potatoes that was not going to go away. Mulling over the case studies we had covered at the course the solution became apparent to me and it happily suited all stakeholders affected by or involved in the problem. As the CEO said in response to the solution, "That idea just paid for the course." I doubt that you can evaluate a course like Taking the Helm so easily, but it certainly does help.

Brett Mason is Director of the Museum of Wellington, a facility of the Wellington Museums Trust. He joined the Museum in 2001 as Marketing Manager for both the Museum and Capital E, in 2003 he moved fulltime to the Museum as Marketing/Public Programmes Manager and after a short period as Acting Director, was appointed to his present role in July 2006.



Dunedin Public Art Gallery
8 - 11 April 2008

Museum People - the Human Collection

The theme will focus on people - the staff and volunteers who keep our museums and art galleries functioning - and the challenges, training and development needs, and opportunities that we constantly juggle.

For details, visit
www.museums-aotearoa.org.nz