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المكتويات

١	د. عبد الله محمد باوزير	الاقتتـاحية
٣	د. عبد الحكيم شايف محمد	- الحفاظ على التراث الثقافي في اليمن- الجهود المبذولة في ترميم وصيانة الآثار الثابتة والمنقولة
١٦	عدنان باوزير	- مقترح سيناريو للمعرض الدائم بالمتحف الوطني
٢١	بشير عبد الرقيب القدسي	- تصور لعرض آثار العصور التاريخية (عصور ما قبل الإسلام) في المتاحف اليمنية
٢٤	يحيى لطف العبالي	- تصور لعرض آثار العصور الإسلامية في المتحف الوطني
٢٦	عبد الرحمن حسن السقاف	- منبر بمتحف سيئون يعود إلى القرن السابع الهجري
٣٢	نقيب / محمد حمود جحرز	- المنبر الخشبي في المتحف الحربي عوامل التلف والترميم
٣٦	حسين أبو بكر العيدروس	- استقراء الصور التاريخية (للدراستات الأثرولوجية والأثنوغرافية) نموذج من خلال صور الرحالة لحضرموت
٤٣	حسن عبيد طه عبيد	- من المتحف الفنية في شبام حضرموت (مخطوطة إسلامية)
٤٨	محمد عوض باعليان	- أزياء من اليمن القديم من خلال منحوتات المتحف الوطني بصنعاء
٥٢	إبراهيم عبد الله الهادي	- ملامح الصناعات الحرفية في اليمن القديم
٥٥	صلاح سلطان الحسيني	- الأعمدة وتيجانها في اليمن القديم
٦٥	عبد الملك محمد المقضي	- نبذة موجزة عن الخيل اليمنية الأصيلة في التراث العربي
٦٩	حسين عمر أحمد الهادي	- مكتبة الأحقاف للمخطوطات قبلية زوار حرم الإقليم
٧٢	محمد راجح مراد	- لمحة عن متحف الطويلة بمحافظة المحويت
٧٣	إعداد / عدنان باوزير	- المعارض التفسيرية
٧٥	عبد المنان عبد الرؤوف العبسي	- إقتناء القطع الأثرية والمخطوطات الصعوبات والمعوقات
٧٦	هيئة التحرير	- من أخبار المتاحف

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Foreign section

القسم الأجنبي

1	Richard Van Herwijnen	The National Museum Project
3	Kees Plaisier	How to manage the quality of a museum?

How to manage the quality of a museum?

Some thoughts as an introduction

*Kees Plaisier **

The first question: when is my museum performing well?

When this question is put to museum directors the answers are very different. This is because they focus on different aspects of the complicated museum work. But it has also to do with the different goals and tasks of museums, to the public and the outside stakeholders at one side and to the professional tasks inside, like care for collections and all that.

There is not just one criterion to measure the quality of the museum, you need many of them.

It sure is not only the number of visitors, but then, what more is important?

How do we find that the museum is performing well?

When the museum is well known? When no exhibits are stolen or damaged? When a reconstruction of the building is done in time and within budget limits? When there is an innovative cooperation with schools? When the museum publishes professional articles and books? When the government is happy with the museum? When the press always is interested in the museum? When the staff is well motivated? When the collection is well stored and registered? When the local community is supporting the museum full heartedly? When the director is nationwide well known?

Because there are so many different aspects and criteria it is worthwhile to try and find a practical and clever answer on the question. Because then it will be possible to make improvements and to set priorities in that.

A well prepared discussion in the museum about quality and quality management is stimulating and provokes people inside and outside the museum to work on improvements.

So, it's not about the question itself. It's about improving the quality of the museum.

Improving the quality of the museum with quality management

How can we define, measure, improve and monitor museum quality? It is possible with "quality management". In business this is already for years a well known phenomenon. Continuously and systematically focus on the quality of the organisation is called "quality management".

From the point of view "when is my museum performing well?" it means that we take care of museum quality, not just "ad hoc", but in a structural approach, covering all aspects of the museum.

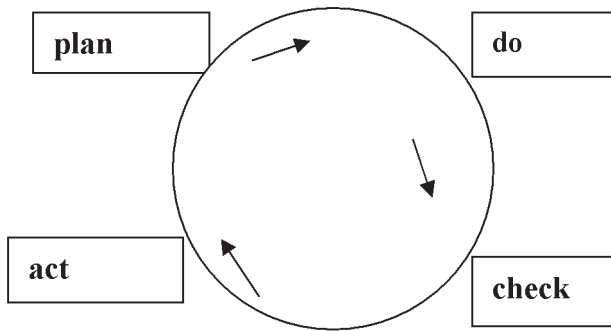
This does not necessary mean long and disturbing surveys, lots of administrative work, many many meetings. It can be done effectively on a small scale.

What we want to do is to manage quality and to make it visible and measurable. Again: in order to improve quality. The goal of quality management is to improve quality in all aspects of the museum, in all functions. This means that it's not a matter of analysis, or of the system of quality management. These are just the means we need to do better where we can...

When we start with quality management, it is the beginning of a continuing process, not

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just a short time project. We aim at constant improvement, as shown in this scheme



plan: analyse and make a time schedule before starting an activity

do: work on the planned activities

check: check the result

act: evaluate, react and respond on the result and go on with a better plan

Quality management is not just for the managers. All staff should be involved, because in daily practice every staff member influences the museum quality. It only works when there is real support in the organisation and when the staff starts to take initiative for improvements themselves.

Steps towards managing and improving quality

We need to take some basic steps first:

- * make or check the museums' mission statement
- * develop strategic choices from that mission
- * analyse your strong and weak points and the threats and opportunities you have (a SWOT analysis)
- * analyse the relations with your stakeholders (what do they offer us, what do we offer them, is that in balance?)

When this is done you should:

- * define what our own quality demands are: what criteria do we use ourselves?
- * then look around to our stakeholders: how do they Judge us, what are their obvious criteria?
- * focus on one important stakeholder: the visitor. So we need to know what the

visitor thinks. Visitor survey is an important instrument.

- * make an inventory of the criteria we use in our museum profession, for example in conservation, presentation, and ethics
- * find out in what systematic way elsewhere in museum land quality is managed. In some countries (U.S. of A., UK, Canada, Belgium, The Netherlands) there is a system of "accreditation", in which a museum can be officially recognised as a professional museum
- * find out which quality management systems are successful in business life
- * find out whether such a system can be useful in museum practice

And in the end you must always

- * return to the question "when is my museum performing well", for not to loose the goal: namely improving quality.

Your own criteria are essential

Many people outside the museum, many organisations, colleagues and institutions have opinions about the quality of the museum: visitors, teachers, politicians, civil servants, sponsors, journalists. It is important to know these opinions and judgements and to take them seriously.

But first of all it is essential that we inside the museum know what we think is important. Our own quality awareness makes us a much better partner in discussions with the people and institutions outside.

Quality awareness in all staff members leads to better performance and helps us focus on what to improve and makes us think about what we neglected. We observe with more criticism and we are curious for reactions from the public and other stakeholders.

In thinking about our own criteria we of course look at the museums' mission. But the definition of a museum, as formulated by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) can be a good guideline to start with.

«A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public,

which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment”

This definition can be used as a checklist:

- are we in service of society? And how?
- how open are we to the public? In hours and in attitude?
- what do we acquire? do we have a policy and a plan? when and why do we not acquire?
- how do we conserve? is our storage okay? do we use the right equipment and materials?
- do we research? And what? What do we do with the results?
- how do we communicate? To whom?
- how do we exhibit? What and why?
- do we offer learning and enjoyment? How do we do this?
- do we just work with material evidence or does this include immaterial things?

Just a thorough discussion in the museum using these questions can make you and your people much more aware of what is important, what is a priority and what there is to improve.

Using a quality management system

We just briefly show you some points of one of the well known systems: The Balanced Score Card. It is not the whole approach, but it will give you an idea.

The BSC approach can be adjusted to your own situation and is suitable for small museums as well.

In the Balanced Score Card we overlook the organisation from different perspectives

- the financial perspective (how can we use our money as well as possible?)
- the customer perspective (how can we maintain good relations with visitors and other stakeholders?)
- the business process perspective (how can we make sure that our internal processes stay effective?)
- the learning and growth perspective (how

can we keep up to date and innovative?)

For use in museums we add a fifth perspective

- * the perspective of society (how do we serve society best?)

The Balanced Score Card is about balance. The connections, inter relations and the balance between the five perspective is important. Just as the balance between short and long term, between inside and outside orientation.

The first stage

We start with BSC after we worked on a mission statement, a swot-analysis and a stakeholder analysis. From here we look from the different perspectives to the long term. We ask ourselves when we are successful and we describe so called critical successfactors.

An example for one perspective:

financial: we want a bigger share of our finances coming from sponsors, we wish a bigger part of our budget free for activities, we wish to stay within our budget limits

The second stage

Now is the question: how can we measure and monitor our goals? In BSC terms we need therefore performance indicators. These are numbers or information that shows whether we reached our goals.

With the above example this can mean:

critical success factor	possible performance indicator
financial perspective	
more sponsors	percentage of exhibition spending
more free budget	percentage of budget
stay within budget	budget limits

When we do this for all five perspectives, there will be a lively discussion within the museum about what is measurable, what is a priority, what is relevant. This stimulates again the quality awareness.

Third stage

Now we look whether we can really deal and work with the performance indicators. Do the measure what we want? Do we have information about where we are now? We

need to have good information about the present situation, otherwise we can never see whether we improved.

The results of the discussion can be put into this scheme (again we just stay with the example of the financial perspective)

possible performance indicator	can we work with this indicator and is it effective?	is information available now?
	yes. no. partly	yes. no. partly
financial perspective		
sponsoring as a percentage of exhibition spending		
"free" percentage of budget		
budget limits		

When there is no information about the present state, we need to look for that first. When an indicator is not or partly useful, we of course need to reconsider.

Fourth stage

Now we established our indicators and the way we can work with them we asks ourselves about the norm.

What does it mean: more sponsors? What exactly do we want to achieve? And are we going to reach that goal in practice, in what period, with what measures?

Of course our goals, getting more concrete now, must be realistic. Not just in themselves, but also in combination with all that already has to be done in the museum. Careful discussions about "what is necessary, what is good in practice, what is realistic" are essential; in order to keep everyone involved and motivated.

Fifth stage

In this stage we look to the first year of our plan. What actions are needed, who is responsible, who will execute the actions, how much time is involved, how much money? Can we combine the actions with our regular tasks? If not what will be cancelled.

Just some thoughts

As I said in the subtitle of this small article, these are just some thoughts, to make you think about the importance of managing your museum quality.

It can be done in a simple way and in a sophisticated way with one of the well known

approaches. As always: the more you put in it, the more you get out of it.

Anyhow: you ought to be aware of your own quality criteria. To discuss effectively the opinions and judgements of people from outside. But essentially: to know what to improve, so that you can me even more proud of your unique museum.

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