

When I read *Leaders Make the Future*, I was in charge of Strategic Partnerships at the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), and we had just published *Museums, Libraries and 21st Century Skills*, a pan-agency project I directed. Working with some consultants from the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a coalition of formal educators, educational associations, and the private sector, as well as a task force of museum and library leaders, our two main goals were supporting “museums and public libraries in envisioning and defining their roles as institutions of learning in the 21st century” and, for those outside the sector, ensuring “understanding among policymakers and other stakeholders about the integral roles museums and libraries play in creating an engaged citizenry and competitive workforce.” Among the 21st century themes we identified: global awareness; civic literacy; health literacy; and environmental literacy. Among the skills: critical thinking and problem solving; cross-disciplinary thinking; media literacy; flexibility and adaptability; and social and cross-cultural skills. Although we knew that some museums and libraries already addressed these topics, we highlighted them. We also emphasized the importance of nurturing these competencies within our own staffs.

While it’s hard to believe that these references were published a full decade ago, each holds lessons and insights for today’s VUCA environment—both about roles museums and libraries can play within their communities, and, as important, about the adaptive, flexible, and strategic leadership skills that need to be prioritized at all levels of our organizations.

I left IMLS in 2013 to work more exclusively in leadership programs, and in the May/June 2015 issue of *Museum* magazine, I published “Museum Leadership in a Hyper-Connected World: Six Skills for Leaders at All Levels.” My distillation included strategic agility; “getting personal” (emotional intelligence); communication; data fluency; rapid and rigorous prototyping; and systems thinking (seeing the big picture).

While these skills were by no means a comprehensive compendium, they remain, in my view, valuable components of today’s leadership tool kit.

COVID-19 has brought home, in vivid and concrete reality, the VUCA world in which we live. None of us—nor our institutions and communities—have a handle on the near (or distant) future. We need to value, prioritize, and practice new skills, competencies, and mindsets.

One of my favorite quotes comes from the French author Andre Gide, who wrote, “Man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore.” The COVID-19 pandemic has unmoored many of us from our familiar harbors. Danger, yes. But new discoveries as well. The future demands courage, agility, and imagination. Who knows what opportunities await?

RESOURCES

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RESPONDING TO THE PANDEMIC

By David A. Ucko

The Covid-19 pandemic will be a seminal event for those who live through it. It seems unlikely that things will return to the *status quo ante*, even if vaccines becomes available sooner rather than later. How might science centers

respond?

At least in the short-term, “hands-on” experiences may become “gloves-on,” with disposable gloves provided on

admission at disinfection stations, or replaced by “hands-off” detection technology. Masks, possibly branded by the science center, may also be provided to those who need them. Admission will be limited initially by public caution and by timed-tickets and other entry controls. Programming by masked staff will emphasize small-group activities for those visiting together.

In addition to these types of operational accommodations, science centers can play more central roles in community-based STEM learning. For example, what other local institutions are better positioned to serve as the trusted locus for public education about the biology and treatment of infectious disease? To avoid each science center needing to “reinvent the wheel,” visitor activities should be developed for science centers through a collaborative NISE Network-type model (Ostman 2016) involving scientific, medical, and public health partners. Just as the normal pace and protocols of science R&D are being disrupted, the development process must be reconceptualized to become greatly accelerated.

Many people will continue to limit their outside activities. As a result, this might be an opportune moment to rethink a science kit program for home use. Growing up, I eagerly looked forward to receiving my monthly little blue box with “Things of Science,” created from 1940 to 1989 by Science Service, now Society for Science & Public (Knetzger 2011). To speed up dissemination, perhaps elements of existing NISE Network kits developed for science center use could initially be repurposed. Although developed centrally, kits could be branded or distributed by each science center, with opportunities for supplemental local programming. Ideally, external funding would help make such kits widely available.

Beyond addressing an immediate need, strategically-designed kits could provide a much-needed bridge connecting science centers with other components of the STEM-learning ecosystem. Coordinated to support school-based curricula, they could be supplemented by activities at the science center and community-based organizations, as well as by online communities and videos. Such ecosystem-integrated kits are one way that science centers can strengthen their ties with families, schools, after-school programs, and other providers. In so doing, they could both enhance STEM learning and their role in the community.

In an article on the history of science centers published last year (Ucko 2019), I closed by stating that they would increase their likelihood of thriving by building on research and evidence-based practice, innovating, collaborating, and taking strategic risks. That conclusion holds even more



Things of Science #275, Simple Machines (Sept. 1963). Kit included five wooden pulleys, dowel and two wooden sticks, corrugated paper for gear teeth, twine, wire, thumb tacks, screw eyes, and 28-page instruction booklet with 17 experiments. Credit: cbinvermont.

true today, as science centers respond to the unprecedented challenges and opportunities posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

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