

General notes on advocacy

These notes have been prepared to help anyone who wants to influence other people about the value of nature and natural history in museums. They are not intended to be a set of concrete answers, but are some points to consider that should help you prepare for that important meeting, presentation or interaction. Hopefully you'll find them useful in your work. Good luck, and all power to your elbow!

What is advocacy?

Advocacy is not some kind of magic superpower where you miraculously persuade someone to give you what you want, even against their will or their best interests. So, don't worry if you're not Derren Brown or David Blaine: advocacy is something that everyone can do, and with a bit of preparation it is something that everyone can do really, really well.

Advocacy is, quite simply, about influencing to get results. It is as much about you as it is about the 'recipient'. It is about being persuasive and about being effective in getting the things you want. It also carries a bit of a 'health warning', as you may need to review some of your own thinking, challenge your own assumptions and modify how you approach people, in order to achieve results.

Advocacy comes in a number of different forms: some 'up', some 'down', some 'sideways', and some 'external'. Some of the most common forms of advocacy include:

- **Raising awareness** of value: working with one or more key individuals to influence them on the benefits of the services you provide. This might be with a stakeholder, your manager, or a more senior manager or a funder.
- **Lobbying**: influencing decision-makers (politicians, senior managers, trustees), usually to effect budgetary or policy change. Lobbying involves really careful preparation and usually aims to achieve subtle shifts because, operating at 'high levels', even subtle shifts can make a big difference, and even they can be difficult to achieve and implement.
- **Collective action**: people working together on shared initiatives around a common theme, to raise the profile of a group or sector. Collective action is always more productive than going it alone, as you can get additional thinking, moral support and encouragement. Also, collective action allows you to demonstrate that other organisations have similar issues to yourself, helping to build a persuasive case. Connecting different agendas and organisations together is also a strong tactic.

- Advocacy can also be thought of as including **training and development** schemes, as it brings more people into the 'movement'. As they will continue with the 'cause', this makes your work more resilient.

Whose 'job' is advocacy

An old-fashioned view would be that workers work 'inside' an organisation, while the job of advocacy fell largely or solely on the Director, who was responsible for building relationships outside the museum and bringing in external money. That model is very out of date: forget it. No one knows your work better than you do, and we should all take on some of the responsibility for communicating our own work.

It is now so easy to get your message 'out there' in social media and websites, that everyone has the opportunity to reach people, both nearby and around the world. That also makes it really important that you are clear on the messages that you want to communicate. On a more personal level, if you really believe in something, then developing your advocacy skills is one of the best ways of achieving whatever it is that you want to achieve.

The importance of preparation

Before you can expect someone to 'get' what it is that you want and the benefits of doing it, let alone changing their own mind about it, it is really important that you understand

what it is that you want to get yourself. If you can't explain your point in a couple of minutes, then other people can't really be expected to understand you. This means that key interactions require (need) prior preparation. Some of the questions you might ask yourself could include:

- What am I trying to ACHIEVE?
- What am I advocating FOR?
- Who am I advocating TO?
- What is the SITUATION?
- And what am I trying to CHANGE?
- Why should they CARE?
- What is the DESIRED FUTURE I am trying to get to?
- Am I dealing with a symptom or with the ROOT CAUSE?

Understanding root causes can be a great way of using your time effectively: planning for the interaction that will make the most pervasive changes. There is a great quote from Desmond Tutu, that "There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in." If you find yourself in 'Groundhog Day' situations, it might be time to do some lateral thinking and work out how to handle the root of the problem.

So what is your personal mission?

Missions might sound like something out of a certain spy film with Tom Cruise, or a 60s TV series with self-destructing tape recorders (let's hope not that one, as that was Mission Impossible), but we can all think of our work as one or more

missions. Being clear on what those are can be a great help to you in your work, guiding your decision-making and developing a distinctive personal profile. This can be a big help to you in helping your mission to succeed. You might want to 'provide a great public service', 'connect people with nature through collections', 'make my museum the best in [wherever]', 'help people and collections fulfil their potential', or anything else. Personal slogans can be great for building and harnessing self-belief, and if you believe it, it's relevant to your organisation and you believe you can get it, others are more likely to believe you too and get on board with you.

Be straightforward

In order to be credible, it is important that your claims are credible. Don't overstate your claims as, if they turn out not to be true, you undermine both your own long-term credibility and the credibility of the cause you are advocating for. Be careful about the arguments you use: take the campaign that 'rainforests might hold the cure for cancer' that was around in the 1980s and 90s, for example. What if a synthetic cure for cancer was invented: would that mean rainforests were redundant? Be cautious about making claims that natural history collections can somehow solve enormous environmental challenges (eg. climate change). If you're not certain or don't have the evidence, stick with what you do know, and you know you can do.

What is in it for 'them'?

When you are preparing for a key interaction, have a think about the question 'on what basis am I raising this with them?' Is it because it is part of your job, something you believe strongly in (it might be both), because you have information that the other person doesn't, or because you have ideas on how to move things forward? What responsibilities do you have to them, and what responsibilities do they have to you? Why should they listen to you?

Think about what your existing relationship is with the other person: what can you realistically achieve in one interaction? Do you need to do some relationship building? Being realistic about what can be achieved at each step is really important: think about the ideal outcome, the worst, and what is realistic. If you go 'too fast', the other person might disengage from you, and that has the serious risk that options are closed down. On the flipside, just because you've tried to influence someone about an issue before doesn't mean you can't (or shouldn't) try again if the opportunity presents itself.

It's always worth remembering that you cannot possibly make someone else change their mind: that is not a human power. You can encourage new thinking and influence other people's thinking but ultimately **people always make up their own minds**. It is also important to catch any thinking you might have that 'I'm right and they're wrong'—you just

have different positions and you have to find a way to shift those positions.

For curatorial staff that have had long relationships with nature before they worked in museums, it is important to remember not to make assumptions about other people. Remember that they have not necessarily had the same experiences as you, that they share your interests, that they make the same connections between what's in the museum and the wider world, or that they value the same things as you do. If you can't do this, you will only connect with people like yourself, with the same experiences as you, and with the same intentions as you. That cuts most people out. If you are trying to engage with a wider range of people, then that's a problem for you, not them.

When you're preparing for some advocacy work, it's worth asking yourself: 'what is the problem?' Is it your problem or theirs? Are you sure it doesn't just flow from your personal beliefs, rather than 'what is in everyone's best interests'? Something may need to give, and that may mean you giving up beliefs you are clinging onto. It is also worth spending a good bit of time on trying to really understand what is going on with the other person, to avoid making assumptions about what they are thinking. Try stepping into their shoes, or at least show an interest in their position and what matters to them. If you show an interest in the other

person, they are, let's face it, more likely to show an interest in you.

If you want to influence someone you will need to **genuinely** have an interest in their agenda and what they say in order to connect with them. If that person is really important in helping you achieve your ultimate goal, then it should be possible for you to cultivate an interest in them, if your goal matters that much to you.

If you are trying to connect with lots of people, or people with different interests and motivations, then it becomes increasingly important that you find a range of ways to connect with them, and to be open-minded about 'what's ok'. In terms of working with 'the public', it's important to recognise that **you are not your audience**.

Plan for the future

Who do you most want to influence, and what you would say to them if the opportunity came up. What would you say if you found yourself in the lift with them for five minutes, or if they asked what really mattered to you? By planning for the future, you can help make the most of happy accidents when you meet influential people. You can be ahead of the game and be satisfied that, if the chance did come up, you had done your absolute best.

People power

If all this sounds like it is too much for you to do, you don't necessarily have to go it alone. Instead of thinking of advocacy as 'you with a loudspeaker', think of it as you spreading your message. Find supporters, find friends, find collaborators. Share the load to make it easier on yourself, and let your supporters motivate you to keep going.

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