FLIPPING THE HIERARCHY
Big Lessons from Small Museums • SMAll Talk with the Small Museum Association

LEADING vs. MANAGING vs. DOING

Where are you spending your time?

LEADING	Setting vision, building culture, making strategic calls
MANAGING	Coordinating people, workflows, and resources toward goals
DOING	Executing tasks directly — often unavoidable, but watch the ratio

The small museum trap:
When doing crowds out leading, you become the bottleneck in your own organization. The goal isn't to stop doing — it's to lead while doing.

Ask yourself:

- What did I do this week that only I could do?
- What did I do that someone else could have done with the right support?
- What decision am I avoiding that only I can make?

TRANSLATING YOUR LEADERSHIP

The gap is exposure, not capability.

Instead of saying this…

- "I only manage a small budget"
- "We're just a small museum"
- "I don't have a development team"

Say this:

- "I have managed without margin — every dollar is strategic"
- "I have built systems that function at any scale"
- "I have raised competitive grants without a development department"
- "I have led staff, volunteers, board, and community simultaneously"

COMMUNITY-CENTERED LEADERSHIP

Small museums don't do community engagement. We ARE community infrastructure.

What this looks like in practice:

- Carrying community relationships personally, not institutionally
- Leading DEAI work without a dedicated department
- Adapting faster than large institutions can vote on it
- Knowing your audience because you live among them

The tension to navigate:
Deeply serving community needs and sustaining your organization are not opposites — but they require you to be honest about capacity and say no strategically.

Your leadership compass check-in:

- Are community decisions made from mission clarity or from anxiety?
- Are you building relationships or just responding to requests?
- Is your community work visible in your professional narrative?

YOUR ANCHOR STATEMENT

What is the one thing you know to be true about your leadership that you want this room to walk away with?

Write it here:

YOU ARE NOT IN THIS ALONE

Tools, networks, and next steps for small museum leaders

COLLABORATION ACROSS ORGANIZATIONS

Small museums are natural collaborators — not because we have extra capacity, but because we can't survive without it.

What effective collaboration looks like:

- Leading across organizations without formal authority
- Setting shared goals when missions overlap (and compete)
- Naming the competition honestly so you can work around it
- Building relationships before you need the partnership

Common friction points:

- Too many organizations competing for the same funders
- Collaboration fatigue when there's no formal structure
- Good ideas stalling because no one has capacity to lead them

One thing you can do this week:

Reach out to one peer at another small museum you've been meaning to connect with. Not about a project. Just to talk about what you're navigating.

ADVOCACY: MAKE YOUR VOICE COUNT

The field won't change if we don't say something.

Three actions with real impact:

- Write to your granting organizations — budget minimums exclude us
- Submit sessions, articles, and talks. Share what you do and why it matters.
- Nominate small museum leaders for awards and leadership programs

YOUR PROFESSIONAL NETWORK

Small Museum Network

Active Facebook community for small museum professionals. A space to ask questions, share wins, and find your people. Search "Small Museum Network" on Facebook.

Small Museum Association (SMA)

smallmuseum.org — conferences, resources, and a professional community built specifically for us.

AASLH

aaslh.org — Standards and Excellence Program (StEPs) designed for small and mid-sized history organizations. Strong peer network.

AAM Affinity Groups (emerging)

AAM is rebuilding professional networks as affinity groups after sunsetting the small museum committee in 2022. Get involved early to shape what this becomes.

Regional Museums Committee - ICOM

icr.mini.icom.museum - Join small, local, and community museums on a global scale through this committee of the International Council of Museums.

FIVE PRINCIPLES TO CARRY WITH YOU

- Prestige does not equal impact
- Scale is a function of systems — you've already built them
- The best DEAI work in this field is happening in small museums
- You are both CEO and COO — that is not "less than," that is operationally fluent
- The field needs you at the table. Show up.

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