

THE EXTERNAL VOICE: WHO IS IT AND WHAT IS ITS ROLE?

A key element in any change process is to include an external voice.

The Our Museum programme, funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, worked with a group of museums across the United Kingdom between 2011 and 2016 to embed participatory work through a process of organisational change. The programme also wanted to learn what worked and what didn't, and what is transferable between organisations. We learned that including an external voice is an important part of organisational change.

An external voice means involving people from outside the organisation in open and honest conversations about the process of change, in order to bring fresh and independent perspectives to bear, to encourage reflection, and to help ensure that difficult issues are addressed and not avoided.

The external voice can come from several sources. In the Our Museum programme, these included peers, critical friends, funders, evaluators, community partners, and artists.

Although they all bring different perspectives, each of these external voices offers something specific, and because of that you should have different expectations of their roles. Before you include an external voice, you should have a shared understanding of its role and how it will feed into your organisation – is it just a talking shop, or will it have a practical application? What is it that a particular external voice is doing, and how can it help your organisation?

Critical friend

A critical friend is a trusted person outside the museum who takes the time to fully understand the context of the work and the outcomes that the organisation wants to achieve, asks provocative questions, provides additional data, evidence or lessons from elsewhere that give a fresh perspective, and offers a critique of work. It is a relationship of trust, but an ability to ask the difficult question, or bring the question into the open that perhaps others are avoiding. It is a balance between being positive and constructive, and teasing out the real challenges an organisation is facing. It is about listening to what is said, and what is not said, and being alert to the significance of the body language of the participants, which can be more revealing than words. Crucially, it is about ensuring that everyone's voice is heard and given value, and that no-one dominates a conversation or tries to shut it down.

Who can be a critical friend?

In most cases, a critical friend will be commissioned by the organisation to help with a particular issue or piece of work. Although, in principle, peers or community partners can be critical friends, they do need to understand the role and to have the skills and experience to carry it out effectively – and they may be too close to the organisation to be properly objective. In some cases, funders and independent evaluators can also be critical friends, although that relationship can be complex because an organisation may not feel able to be totally honest, as its responses may affect current or future grants. Generally, the most effective critical friends are externally commissioned consultants.

Pros:

- More objective and can help you see things that are hard to see close up
- Ensures the awkward issues are surfaced and addressed
- Ensures everyone's voice is heard

Cons:

- They need time to understand your organisation
- They can't affect change, they can only advise and question
- If you choose the wrong critical friend, they may be too 'polite' or lack the experience to challenge you effectively

Peers as external voices

Mentoring and sharing

The external voice from peers – colleagues from other museums and galleries – is different to that of a critical friend.

In the Our Museum programme, the organisations and their community partners all came together for a series of annual peer reviews, and the lead contacts from each organisation met quarterly. They agreed that their relationship was not one of critique as critical friends, or even of giving feedback – certainly in the early days, before trust developed, they were uncomfortable critiquing each other.

The peer voice was more about mentoring, and the sharing of experience, knowledge, information and learning, or acting as a sounding board: 'we've done this; have you tried that?'

Crucially, they all had a shared area of interest and shared goals, and it was a relationship of trust built up over several years. In the Our Museum programme, which brought several organisations together, there was conspicuously more sharing and openness at the end of the programme than at the beginning. Unlike the critical friend, this is a two-way relationship, with everyone on the same level.

Peer feedback

Feedback from peers is most effectively done in a structured way. If you want feedback, you need to ask for it explicitly, but for it to work you need to build trust beforehand with a small, safe group which encourages openness.

A good example is the London Museums Development Team's Survive and Thrive peer review process (search for their online toolkit 'Survive and Thrive Self-Assessment Framework'). This is a self-assessment framework with a peer review element. The 'peers' are Museum Development Officers and trained peers from other museums who visit an organisation as part of a structured and supportive process linked to nine organisational characteristics. Their role is to feed back ideas and suggestions that the organisation can learn from.

Pros:

- Peers often understand your work and have the expertise to make useful comments. They might, eventually, be very candid, so it can be a very efficient and cost effective way of learning

Cons:

- Peers often feel constrained from offering proper critique

- In a peer group, it is important to emphasise that each organisation is so different and its goals are different, so that comparing yourselves against a very different organisation can occasionally feel disheartening
- It takes time to build trust for effective two-way critique

Community partners as an external voice: aiding reflection

Early in the Our Museum process, we regarded the role of community partners as potentially being critical friends. In practice, we have learned that community partners can best help an organisation by helping it to reflect actively and regularly, on what has gone well and not so well, on the next steps, and on their relationship.

This is quite a different role to that of a critical friend, who is more of an objective facilitator. Indeed, the closer the relationship between an organisation and its community partners, the less able a community partner is to be objective and critical – essentially, and ideally, they become part of the team; but they continue to have a different external perspective which can aid in reflection and bring new thinking, support and problem-solving to a process of organisational change.

For example, staff and community partners at the National Museum of Wales include reflection as the final agenda item at their meetings, to ensure they reflect regularly together on the meeting and the wider programme. Community partners have shared their own experiences around change in their own sectors, an example of cross-sector learning. Community partners are also part of Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums' Alternative Management Team, which offers a different perspective on strategic issues to the senior management team.

Pros:

- In a process of embedding participation, the views of your community partners are essential

Cons:

- Their perspectives are crucial, but not as objective as a critical friend might be
- The longer and closer your relationship becomes, the less objective their perspectives will be
- Community partners, not being museum specialists, sometimes feel constrained from critiquing a museum
- Occasionally it takes the input of a critical friend to bring out the voices of community partners

Artists as an external voice: a fresh perspective

Increasing numbers of museums are working with artists, not just to produce new artwork for exhibition, but for the artist to work with the organisation, to comment on it, and to provide a different perspective from that of museum professionals on how the organisation functions. An artist brings a fresh creative and open perspective to these issues, unencumbered by layers of professional museum training and history. Often, they can point out working practices which are outdated or illogical, but have been accepted for years as 'the way it is'.

For example, Glasgow Museums commissioned an artist to act as a catalyst for change within the organisation. The role was to use their practice to help the museum to learn new things about themselves as a community of museum staff, and challenge them to explore new ways of working together as a staff team.

Pros:

- Can be a creative and fresh approach to organisational change, re-invigorating the staff
- The process can also result in an artistic output, as the artist responds creatively to working with the museum staff

Cons:

- An artist intervention won't appeal to all members of staff – some will find it an irrelevant distraction and might respond badly
- Like critical friends, an artist can't affect change: they can only challenge and offer fresh perspectives

Below is a table which summarises the roles of different external voices, based on the experiences of the Our Museum organisations:

✓ Yes: this external voice is very suitable for this role

☹ In some cases, it might be suitable, but check understanding and skills are appropriate

✗ No: in most cases, this external voice is not suitable for this role

	Critical friend	Peers	Community partners	Artists	Funders	Evaluators
Teasing out challenges	✓	✗	☹	✗	☹	☹
Mentoring	✗	✓	☹	✗	✗	✗
Sharing experiences and learning	✗	✓	☹	✗	✗	✗
Feedback	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	☹
Reflection	✓	☹	✓	☹	✗	☹
Fresh perspectives	✓	✗	☹	✓	✗	☹

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