

The Brady Bunch or Best Buy: Is Your

by L. Ann Gwinn

You're happily sitting in your office, sipping coffee and casually reading the latest news. Suddenly, the door bursts open and your children interrupt the tranquility. You sigh, wishing they would fight it out on the lawn. Maybe you could settle it by putting both of them in time-out and forcing them to apologize to one another, followed by a big hug and some cookies. That may work at home. However, you can't really do that with your employees. Sound a little too familiar?

On the other hand, small museums may be drawn to ideas that promise to improve their functioning and public appearance through adopting a corporate structure more suited to Best Buy or General Mills. But these hierarchies can be rigid, and may not produce a sustainable, functional organization. The reality on the ground is that CEOs at small museums or historic sites often feel less like corporate leaders and more like the heads of large, sometimes dysfunctional, families.

Many organizational consultants and programs address problems from business approaches, which seem to be about gimmicks and the bottom line. In the smaller, historical museums where I have worked, none of the "brand name ideas" involving goofy gimmicks have produced constructive, cohesive organizations. We continued to address problems as they arose, to isolate ourselves in our offices, and to focus only on the current crisis. What we needed was a model that helped us all see that we were truly part of something bigger than ourselves.

One surprising alternative to the artificial, one-time gimmick comes from the journals read by family therapists. Family systems theory (FST) can provide new insight on old problems, and help small museums find solutions that can help employees connect to the organization and each other. FST views the family as not only a collection of individuals, but also an entity of its own with characteristics and strengths that only emerge from the mutual interaction. This goes back to the notion that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993; Hanson, 1995). But once those parts learn to work together, removing one of them is a disruptive event that produces confusion, frustration, worry and even a little panic. Divorce hurts the people left behind, as do layoffs and sudden resignations.

One of the most common phrases pitched by employers is "we treat each other like family." Whether that is good or bad is up for debate. But the bottom line is that workplaces are often very much like families, where there are emotional connections, power struggles, and communication and behavioral patterns. The trials and tribulations at an organization can be passed down from one generation of workers to the next. One worker's problems don't happen in a silo, and can easily affect the performance of coworkers or distract administrators from the museum's mission. There are several important concepts in FST to consider in workplace situations, including **triangulation**, **differentiation**, **termination** and **boundaries** (Matheny & Zimmerman, 2001).

Triangulation occurs when one of two people in a situation brings in a third person to provide support or solace

(Tolley, 1994). As an organizational example, this behavior occurs when disputes between members of the management team are shared with a third person, who is a member of the staff. Rather than address the issue, one of the managers brings in a third party who has no justification for being involved in the dispute, but one who does have a stake in its outcome. While this may bring temporary relief, it creates problems over the long term, much like a daughter who is drawn in as a confidant in her parent's arguments. Just like children, employees do not necessarily need to know the process by which decisions are made, or the details of every challenging situation.

It is important to note that bringing in a third party is not necessarily triangulation. Museums often contract with consultants to address situational or organizational problems. This is a healthy behavior, much like couples seeking the input of a therapist. However, consultants can be triangulated into the museum's problems when they have a personal stake in one party's position in the organization. For example, a consultant with close ties to the board may provide exactly the information the board wants to hear, while ignoring negative information provided by staff. Much like therapists, an external consultant walks a tightrope between aiding the system and becoming a part of it.

Differentiation, on the other hand, is a situation where an individual has become disinterested and disconnected from a family, a condition often seen in teenagers. The differentiated employee has withdrawn from the museum's shared mission and is simply occupying space. You can readily identify this if you have an employee that stays behind a closed door and never shows up for

Organization a Business or a Family?

staff meetings. This is even more harmful to the organization when it involves a director or member of the board. In many cases, it is easier to avoid differentiation than to reengage the individual.

In the workplace, *termination* is often seen when employees leave the organization, are promoted, or are relocated. When termination occurs, it can introduce chaotic elements to the system, such as uncertainty, distrust, and poor communication. Museums, like families, must work to reestablish a sense of equilibrium in the face of change. Unless management actively intervenes, however, those chaotic elements can be incorporated into the new structure. In some cases, a sense of survivor's syndrome can manifest in employees that remain with an organization. These employees can feel a combination of guilt or grief, and may feel emotionally trapped in a vicious cycle. If the remaining workers sense that their departing colleagues were treated unfairly or arbitrarily, there can be long-term resentment (Janes, 1997). Just like a bad divorce, the effects of termination can linger long after the event.

A family is outlined by its *boundaries*, which define who is inside or outside of the system. Boundaries need to be strong to protect the system, but also flexible enough to allow change. In museums, they are often described in employee handbooks, memos, and the organization's by-laws. They help regulate the closeness of departments and identify overlaps between different divisions. Some subsystems may be "diffused," meaning that there is a good deal of overlap between different parts of the organization, or they may be "rigid," where everyone is expected to remain within their assigned domain. For example, the board of directors is a rigid subsystem with a specific role and method of interaction with the rest of the organization.

In families, boundaries are established both by tradition and by consensus. Parents are expected to define the roles assumed by their children as they grow, assign chores and responsibilities as they mature. However, when parents do this inconsistently or change the rules arbitrarily, children get confused, stressed, and overwhelmed. Inconsistent parenting, divorce, or other changes in family boundaries can threaten the system and may even cause it to collapse. In the workplace this can be witnessed in a lack of consistent policies or procedures, frequent changes in management, mergers or takeovers, etc. (Kern & Peluso, 1999). No one expects children to immediately adapt when their divorced parents remarry. But new executive directors or board members often assume that staff and volunteers will quickly and joyously adapt to their new ideas, policies and procedures.

More commonly, small museums blur the boundary between the roles of volunteer and employee. Volunteers may feel like museum staff has forgotten that their time is donated not salaried. Employees may face volunteers who assume administrative power, while their supervisors refuse to intervene lest they alienate a potential donor.

So what do you do if your museum is more "Brady Bunch" than "Best Buy"?

Establish Rituals

Rituals serve to connect people and to celebrate the organization's history. They can be formal or informal, but, most often, these are events that create a special sense of well-being. In a family, rituals symbolize continuity, stability, and the meaning of personal bonds while helping members accept change. Rituals are not task-oriented



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VAM would like to thank L. Ann Gwinn for contributing this article. Ms. Gwinn is an independent consultant with Conspectus Nonprofit Solutions, working with small historic and non-profit organizations in southwest Missouri. Previously, she has worked for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, the Ramsey County (MN) Historical Society and the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis.

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VAM Voice

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The first pilot site for VAM's new Collections in Action Program was the Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site in Richmond.

**Brady Bunch or Best Buy:
Is Your Organization a Business or a Family?**

**Photographic Processes
& Caring for Photographs**

VAM Annual Report

Director's Corner



Dear Members,

My bags are finally unpacked and the laundry done, but I find my dreams still filled with images of the museums and historic sites we visited in Great Britain October 18-Nov. 1.

The VAM museum delegation to the United Kingdom was small in number (5), but we were welcomed everywhere and treated like royalty (and they know royalty!). The primary focus of our trip was attending the international conference on Museums, Sustainability and Growth in Norwich October 23-24. We used that as a springboard for two weeks of visits with colleagues at museums in London, Norwich, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Chesterfield (for a day-by-day account of our adventures, see the VAM blog at <http://vamuseums.blogspot.com>).

Like the other members of the delegation, this trip came out of my own pocket (we all saved up for a year) – but was it ever worth it! The days were jam-packed with appointments and tours; so many people took time out of their busy schedules to show us around. Our hosts were some of the colleagues who participated in our “Rediscovering Virginia” exchange program in March 2007 – Jackie Keily, Curator, Department of Early London History and Collections, Museum of London; Bill Seaman, Assistant Head of Museums, Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service; Jill Napier, Community Learning Officer, Norwich Cathedral; Peter Trowles, Mackintosh Curator, Archives and Collections Centre, The Glasgow School of Art; and Anne-Marie Knowles, Director of the Chesterfield Museum.

Our gratitude also goes to other museum colleagues kind enough to take us under their wing were Suzanne Smith, Display & Collections Management Curator

of Furniture, Textiles & Fashion, Victoria & Albert Museum; Richard Woff, Head of Schools & Young Audiences Education, The British Museum; and Tony Trowles, Librarian, The Muniment Room & Library, Westminster Abbey.

A particular theme turned out to be storage areas; it was interesting to see how museums large and small tackled the problems that museums here in Virginia also face. Another theme was children's programming – how museums of all types adapt displays to appeal to and inform children. This seemed the more common approach than having separate children's museums, and we were quite impressed by some of the ingenious exhibits we saw.

In fact, one of the things that we remarked upon over and over in our travels was how popular museums seemed to be, especially with families. Everywhere we went, even in the middle of weekdays, the museums were full and many of the patrons were young families with small

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Our News Deadlines

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Our Mission

The Virginia Association of Museums is a non-profit membership organization for museums and individuals associated with museums, primarily in Virginia and Washington, DC, serving all museum disciplines. The Association provides education, information, resource and support services, facilitates communication among the institutions and individuals of its membership, fosters inclusiveness and serves as an advocate to governmental and other decision-making authorities on issues relating to museums.

children. It was exciting to see, and it was not just the big “important” museums but the small community museums as well.

There is much that we can learn from our colleagues in the United Kingdom – and, I'd like to think, much they can

learn from us. There are many ties between British museums and Virginia ones, and many common bonds, and it is always enriching professionally to exchange ideas and look at new ways to approach shared challenges.

The economy is an

uncertain beast, but we hope to continue and expand this rewarding professional exchange. Ideas and suggestions welcome!

Sincerely,

Margo

Margo Carlock,
Executive Director, VAM

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