

Museum Practice Matrix: A Leadership Reflection Tool

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Museums and historic sites operate within complex community, funding, and governance environments. The Museum Practice Matrix is designed as a reflection and conversation tool—not an evaluation or rating system. It helps leaders examine how everyday practices, behaviors, and decisions shape public trust, relevance, and long-term sustainability. Progress across the Matrix is not about doing more, but about acting with greater clarity and intention.

The Matrix highlights patterns of practice commonly found across museums of different sizes, missions, and capacities. Most organizations operate in multiple modes at once and practices described as “Foundational” are common and often appropriate given available capacity.

Using the Matrix

This tool can be used to:

- Identify strengths and gaps across the organization
- Support strategic conversations with staff, boards, or partners
- Clarify where attention and resources will have the greatest impact
- Avoid jumping to tactics before addressing foundational issues

1. Look for Patterns

Review each area of the Matrix and note where current practices most often land. Expect variation across departments and programs. Focus on **recurring patterns**, not exceptions or individual performance.

2. Identify One or Two Priority Gaps

Select one or two areas where there is a clear disconnect between stated purpose and everyday practice, or where external expectations are increasing faster than internal capacity.

Key question: *Where would greater intentionality most strengthen our organization right now?*

3. Use as a Conversation Starter

Use the Matrix to structure strategic discussions with staff, boards, or partners. The goal is shared understanding—especially around constraints, trade-offs, and realistic timeframes—not consensus on every detail.

4. Link Insights to Decisions

Translate insights into **directional choices**, not new programs. Consider where modest investments, clearer expectations, or stronger systems would produce meaningful results.

5. Avoid Jumping to Tactics

Before approving initiatives or tools, ask whether foundational practices are strong enough to support them. Tactics are most effective when underlying practices are aligned.

Bottom line: The Matrix helps leaders move from activity to intention, and from individual effort to organizational strength.

Museum Practice Matrix	Foundational Limited capacity, competing demands, or short planning horizons	Intentional Deliberate choices about priorities, even when systems are still developing	Durable Practices reinforced by systems, culture, and shared expectations
1. Public Purpose & Relevance How clearly the museum articulates <i>why it exists</i> and <i>why it matters now</i> —and how consistently that purpose guides priorities, planning, and decisions.	Mission provides broad direction but is rarely referenced explicitly Relevance is assumed based on history, collections, or mandate Decisions prioritize continuity, compliance, and immediate needs Planning is informal, reactive, or focused on short-term demands	Mission and vision are referenced when setting priorities Relevance is articulated for specific audiences or communities Leaders use mission to guide some trade-offs and decisions Planning reflects vision, even if inconsistently applied	Mission is defined in terms of intended public outcomes Relevance is actively tested, discussed, and refined Trade-offs are explained through mission and strategic direction Planning aligns priorities across short-, mid-, and long-term horizons
2. Organizational Signals & Culture The visible and invisible cues—policies, behaviors, routines, and decision-making—that communicate the museum’s values and how it operates.	Daily practices are shaped by habit, precedent, and individual roles Expectations are learned informally through observation Decision-making prioritizes efficiency and problem-solving Policies focus on basic operations and risk management	Values are named and referenced in leadership decisions Expectations are clearer, though not always consistent Some routines and systems reinforce shared priorities Communication supports coordination and alignment	Culture consistently reinforces mission, vision, and values Systems support clarity, transparency, and shared decision-making Staff understand how decisions are made and why Internal alignment strengthens external credibility
3. Community Relationships The quality, depth, and durability of the museum’s relationships with the people and communities it serves.	Engagement occurs primarily through programs and events Relationships are maintained through individual staff effort Community input is informal or occasional Focus is on access, attendance, and participation	Relationships are cultivated beyond single interactions Evaluation informs selected programs or initiatives Trust develops through repeated engagement Engagement is increasingly linked to mission and goals	Relationships are reciprocal, long-term, and trust-based Community perspectives influence priorities and planning Power and responsibility are shared where appropriate Partnerships advance shared outcomes
4. Learning, Evidence, & Adaptation How does the museum learn from experience and adjust its practices?	Success is measured through activity, attendance, or required metrics Learning occurs through experience and professional judgment Evaluation is limited or compliance-driven Change is primarily reactive	Outcomes are defined for selected programs or initiatives Feedback and data support incremental improvement Evaluation methods are proportional to capacity Adjustments are made based on evidence	Outcomes guide program design, strategy, and investment Multiple forms of evidence inform decisions Learning is documented and shared internally Adaptation is proactive and ongoing