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Conservators Delivering Change

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to support conservators to be recognised as positive changemakers. Effective changemakers can diagnose their experience of change, recognise their opportunity to negotiate and influence outcomes, identify the scale and depth of change required and the impact that change will have on others. Conservation practice has change at its core, with interventions on objects, collections or buildings that change them or their environment: beneficial conservation is cooperative and inclusive in how those changes are conceived and delivered. The paper considers change beyond conservation treatments offering a selection of tools and techniques to help diagnose and deliver change. The importance of engaging others in discussions and decision-making for delivering positive change is stressed.

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Introduction

The focus of this paper is on helping conservators understand the components of change and in so doing become more effective at diagnosing situations where they find themselves experiencing, instigating or leading change. The intention of the paper is to help conservators to develop their confidence to understand, embrace and lead change and through that improved practice consciously seek positive outcomes for a broad range of beneficiaries. Everyone experiences change in their life, this paper encourages conservators to recognise and build their confidence to identify and perhaps modify aspects of their own values and behaviours; to bring others together to identify how the future could be better and to lead or deliver changes within their own work, team or organisations. In recognition of the circumstances of many practising conservators the paper has its main focus on influence-based change which can be delivered where there is less institutional power.

Conservation interventions on objects are the most obvious changes arising in conservation practice: whether altering the rates of decay, making a repair, or revealing information, the tangible or intangible aspects are changed. Beyond this there are several realms in which conservators could deliver change: from change in their own approach and practice, leading change in teams, changing the institution and finally changing broader social structures. In seeking to deliver change it is important to move beyond identifying that other people should change their behaviour, values, words, or approach. Individuals seeking change should instead ask themselves: 'What

am I prepared to change in exchange?'. Rather than requiring change from other people one should consider instead the more rigorous ambition of delivering change together.

Conservators and change

Conservation is underpinned by the concept of change: our work enhances the use and enjoyment of cultural heritage, and we are responsible for the informed curation of that change. Yet there is a residual and oft repeated conception of *the conservator* as someone stopping things that might cause damage. The things being stopped are often activities core to the missions of heritage institutions like learning, fun, music, discovery and engagement. Some argue that conservators are taught with a restrictive and exclusive set of rules that when followed prevent others from engaging positively with the collections (Smith 2021). Others simply characterise organisations as operating a traditional 'do not touch' culture, the origin of which is not identified (Hughes and Phillips 2019). Damage, authenticity, and reversibility are concepts that merit thoughtful discussion within conservation, yet there are occasions when conservation is simplified to the retention of specific material aspects of a thing (Laurenson 2006). The avoidance of loss, or the retention of the 'authentic', when it is conceived of as the retention of tangible elements, can lead to a conservative practice that does not recognise change as a 'positive appreciation of value and opportunity' instead seeing change through 'a negative lens of potential loss' (Wain and Sherring 2021). Although conservators regularly

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respond to processes associated with transformation in their work, they may not always recognise their relationship with change and consequently fail to maximise the opportunities from such a position.

The impression that conservators seek to inhibit change may also arise from a fundamental attribution error where the personality and beliefs of a conservator are intuited from their behaviour (McLeod 2018). Although conservators are often mandated to undertake tasks such as repairing, protecting and managing protective measures for collections, others may read from this that it is their entire purpose and personality. Fundamental attribution error is a well-recognised bias which helps to explain why conservators must work hard to compensate for what may be false perceptions of their motives. Despite undertaking such apparently conservative tasks many conservators feel radical in their ambition and excited by change.

Accept and plan for change

Delivering (positive) change is often not easy. Although the future is unknowable, change will occur so conservators must be able to conceive of perspectives and practices other than those currently in operation. Change will, at times, be steady and evolutionary and at other times sudden and revolutionary (Riley 2015). The catalyst for change may come from within the individual, from an organisation or it may come externally from a changing social, cultural or economic environment (McGowan and Bienkowski 2021). Conservators recognise the inevitability of decay but also the opportunity to intervene to create beneficial outcomes from that changing state: the wear on stone staircases for example captures an evocative history of past footsteps. Similarly, whilst accepting that social and cultural change are inevitable it remains possible for conservators to shape that context to create positive outcomes (Tamarapa 2021).

Whilst accepting uncertainty it remains possible to plan for future events. Simple and accessible processes such as horizon scanning will help conservators to identify and be prepared to respond to changes in the operating environment. Typical horizon scanning methodologies encourage a cooperative process of collecting and discussing data that might indicate future change (Government Office for Science 2017). Such approaches actively engage people in accepting that change will happen and instead of trying to prevent it, recognising and planning for it. Planning to be ready to change and adapt for an uncertain future is a well-established concept and typically suggests practices such as:

- monitoring and analysing data to seek patterns which inform the development of strategies for possible situations,

- building redundancy into systems ensuring an increased capacity to accommodate unexpected events,
- increasing diversity in teams to help plan, manage, and adjust to change (Henderson 2018a).

One example might be recognising changing rainfall patterns which are leading to more flood events, increasing the diameter of rainwater goods, and adding expertise in sustainable land management to the staff team.

Even where a conservator does not seek any change, they should prepare for catalysts that arise elsewhere. In practice this might involve organising a team of conservators to discuss how an external stimulus, perhaps the climate crisis, may impact on their practice, to invite concerned but challenging outsiders into the discussion and then to model possible responses and consider what resource implications may arise. Although prescriptive planning is not a fail-safe nor a catch-all the process of engaging and allowing the group to consider alternative futures will diversify the options, for both predicted and unexpected outcomes.

Time spent engaging others in the planning process may reduce reluctance to act at the point of decision. Because change is inevitable and requires people to operate within shifting contexts the ability to respond well to change will be enhanced by drawing in a plurality of perspectives. Agile changemakers will ensure that activities such as horizon scanning are supported by diverse stakeholders: people bringing different perspectives. Including a plurality of perspectives will help uncover different perceptions of the current situation, barriers to action and the consequences of change on different groups. Although this may extend the planning phase and increase the range of options considered, it can shorten the implementation phase leading to faster, deeper change that offers positive outcomes for many parties.

Ask questions to improve options

If conservators working alone struggle to imagine a broad range of perspectives or options, they could extend their imagination by considering what their practice might look like if the context was different. Consider how a project might change: if there was more access to analysis; if it was undertaken quickly; or if the object donor has asked to observe the conservation work. Such scenarios help to identify both the absolutes of the problem and those aspects which are context driven and could be subject to multiple interpretations and options.

A helpful tool to enable decisive change in uncertain conditions is *pre-mortem* questioning (Klein 1998). Ask a team to imagine that the solution they

had planned was implemented and went wrong and then list and describe possible causes of that error. This list becomes a resource to develop mediations to change and improve the plan. An example might be in planning to clean tarnish from a silver thread on a garment: imagine the chemical chosen for tarnish removal escapes the control of the conservator and contaminates the silk substrate. Having identified this by *pre-mortem* questions the conservator can place an additional barrier between thread and silk and have additional absorbent material to hand in case of a leak or spill. If the consequences of what could have gone wrong are considered too great, then an alternative approach might be sought. This problematising approach can operate at different scales, from being prepared for an object to break during air abrasion (have an adhesive and sand tray on standby) through to planning the removal of a large mosaic in a civic centre which might be disrupted by political events. To prepare for a change there are opportunities to: investigate possible patterns of what can go wrong; gather additional resources; or seek input from more diverse voices in the planning phase.

Know what you want to change

A sense of frustration at a current situation is a powerful motivator to act, but effective action will be made more likely by a deconstruction and articulation of the context in which change is desired. Understanding what form and pattern of change is wanted will support clarity of practice. Creating an understanding of the substance, timeframe and commitment to change that is required will help to invest appropriate effort for a suitable outcome.

When seeking to change another person or group of people, it is helpful to examine how deeply seated the change would be for those parties. Is the goal to change their behaviour or their values? A behavioural change might be as simple as a contractor not taking a short cut through a gallery disturbing the dust protection. Persuading the contractor that such behaviour is unacceptable (changing values) involves informing them of the implications of their practice and making that matter to them to help them reframe the advantage of the short cut. On the other hand, taping up the access route may prompt no self-reflection but may keep the dust levels down (changing behaviour). Such solutions are only as robust as the barrier and exclude others from any shared responsibility. In a single high consequence instance, behavioural control can be effective, but over time and when applied to those who have other points of engagement with conservation, energy invested into aligning beliefs and values will pay off. The examination of any change sought may reveal that although the point of

conflict is behavioural the root cause of the conflict may rest in differing value systems. Creating a space for an acceptance of plural perspectives will encourage fruitful discussion of value systems that may be far more effective than a procedural insistence on behavioural change.

Do you seek to change the outputs or the outcomes?

The distinction between outputs and outcomes is important; outcomes are the changes sought and outputs are the measurable and describable results delivered in seeking that change. An output that a conservator might seek could be replacement of a lamp with one which emits less ultraviolet radiation; adjustments to an air conditioning setting for sustainability; or an agreement to purchase an expensive but desirable conservation tool. The success or failure of such initiatives are immediately recognisable. Outcomes represent states of being that are sought such as the recognition that conservation is an important part of the museum's public profile or the belief that conservators make a useful contribution to discussions about building management. Changing outcomes may be identified by specific outputs, such as inclusion of conservation work on the museum's Twitter feed or an invitation to a building maintenance meeting. There may be multiple possible outputs that would indicate the successful delivery of an outcome, and outcomes will endure and continue to inform practice after specific tasks are completed. Identifying outcomes ensures an individual or team is more flexible and responsive in seeking change.

Invest in long term change

If fundamental and permanent change is needed, then aim to shift beliefs and values to drive changed behaviours, which will often take longer. If the dust-defying contractors will be on site for three years, then they will without doubt find a way to overcome any physical barrier. Considering the totality of any change needed will help plan the investment of time. When seeking change in a colleague with whom there will be multiple interactions then forced behavioural change in one interaction will create a conflict that will simply be settled in another domain. If, for example, a conservator was to go over the head of a colleague in the design department in the selection of display case suppliers, then that designer will seek ways to 'even the score' perhaps by not reporting construction flaws in the case. Shortcutting to a behavioural change may generate quick results but with the potential for negative consequences over the longer term.

Power, negotiation, and influence in delivering change

In considering their own personal ability to change, conservators should consider their own options for power, negotiation, and influence. Power is highly effective for those who have it, but behavioural change enforced through power is unlikely to be enduring and may create both resentment and an ambition to subvert. Change delivered by the exercise of power alone is unlikely to win widespread allegiance.

Negotiation traditionally represents parties making concessions until they achieve a mutually acceptable outcome. For a negotiation to succeed both parties must be able to concede aspects of their wants while still identifying a valuable outcome. Common business advice is to identify what might happen if there is no agreement and accept any deal that is better than that (Yeh 2021). In conservation terms this could be that the institution's social media team only want to showcase dramatic before and after treatment photographs, but whilst the conservation team want a profile they do not want to be known for dramatic interventions. Faced with an undesired profile or no profile at all the conservators discover that the social media team have decided to prioritise swiping images. As a negotiation that satisfies both parties, the conservation team proposes a preventive conservation message with before and after shots of a mock object damaged by moths with a message of how the team worked to prevent this.

Influence is subtly different from negotiation but is a strategy for change that does not rely on power. To influence an outcome the conservator must identify common purpose with others then create a situation where both sides can take steps, however small, towards a recognisably positive outcome for all. This may represent only a fraction of the conservator's list of wants but it is the positive change that can be the basis of further positive encounters. In planning a new museum, a conservator may not be able to persuade the design team not to locate display cases in the entrance hall. Instead, the conservator can re-frame the problem and focus on keeping the door closed without restricting access. An appeal to sustainable practice and the installation of door sensors and attractive 'we are open' street furniture might ensure that the museum keeps the entrance door closed as standard whilst enhancing access and marketing (with the benefit of reducing environmental fluctuations in the entrance gallery).

Share the vision and goals

Exercising power without communicating a vision will reduce the perception of the legitimacy of those goals.

Negotiation requires clarity on the essential outcomes from a situation and influence requires clarity on the ultimate destination. The intelligent deployment of power, negotiation or influence all require clarity of purpose. Offering a clear purpose or mission helps others to understand and endorse the consequent changes that are necessary to deliver that mission.

Goals sit just below mission as a series of incremental tasks designed to describe realistic, achievable but perhaps ambitious steps to achieve the ultimate outcomes. Goals should be designed to help deliver a vision but there are some reports of the tasks of conservation becoming separated from vision (Waller and Michalski 2005; Henderson 2018b). Such disconnection can see the goals calcify into dogma performed as a closed loop of ritual practice. Rigid conformity may lead to conservators enforcing unwelcome rules that cut across the aims of their colleagues. If vision and mission are connected and understood then all participants in the process can adapt their tasks to deliver the vision and continue to identify purposeful tasks on completion of individual activities.

Recognise the emotional component

Recognising the emotional aspects of a decision will help a changemaker to influence outcomes. Emotion shapes how people think and behave whether acknowledged or not. In seeking to change someone, identifying the emotional aspects of their choices will help to target initiatives appropriately. Identifying and managing their own emotional responses ensures that conservators can use their emotions to their advantage when necessary, mediate their emotional responses when that is more effective, and learn to identify these responses in others.

Where seeking change in conservation practice, managing emotion could be as simple as recording an initial emotional response to a project in a lab book and using that as a challenge to question whether choices made could or should be shaped by that response. This process neatly connects familiar good lab practice with simple therapeutic measures of documentation and acknowledgement. Emotional responses to an object can change during a project, perhaps an initial dislike or indifference to an object might grow into a maternal sense of protection for it after the investment of conservation time. Understanding the emotional response to an object, from disgust or indifference will offer a prompt to reflect on how these impact on conservation decisions. Might the disgust impact on the quality of hand skills, does indifference to the object result in leaving it too long on the bench when it should have been completed? Are preventive conservation measures extraordinarily cautious because the conservator feels attached to

the object or is frightened about the consequence of an error?

When seeking change in others, acknowledge their emotional responses to situations and provocations. Groups working together on projects may not all enter on equal terms: simply acknowledging that the path chosen was not everyone's preferred option at least acknowledges their feelings, making it easier for them to contribute to the outcome. A colleague failing to attend to a project could have difficulty in managing the workload or may have a severe dislike of some of the materials they have been asked to treat. When trying to change such unacceptable practice the correct identification of the cause will aid the successful diagnosis and response leading to the change desired.

When to act?

In common parlance there are two apparently contradictory pieces of advice about making progress when delivering change: the first is 'look before you leap' and the second is 'we will cross that bridge when we come to it'. The ability to discern between situations that require detailed understanding before commencing a task and situations where taking the first step is essential to breaking deadlock relies on identifying the complexity and uncertainty of the context. Where a situation has multiple but understandable variables and where the outcomes from actions can be predicted then the 'look before you leap' strategy is likely to be most effective. This assumes there is no urgency embedded in the context such as responding to an emergency. That said even in emergency preparedness if the variables are predictable then collecting and analysing data can be undertaken to model options for the most efficient responses to threats. In contrast, in situations of great complexity where all the variables can't be known, or the possible outcomes will retain uncertainty even after research then the 'cross the bridge when you come to it' strategy helps avoid paralysis and ensures that resources are expended on positive change. Although the action taken may not be optimal it is likely to be significantly more beneficial than paralysis from indecision.

Avoiding the wrong change!

There is a possibility that the change being sought is not positive and there are many common psychological biases which can inhibit good practice in delivering change. The danger of groupthink or continuing with a project because considerable resource has already been invested in it are two well-documented biases in decision-making. Inviting other parties to contribute to the decision-making will extend the range of aspects considered, making plans more resilient and

inclusive. In turn this increases the chance that solutions will deliver across multiple agendas satisfying a broader range of needs. Engaging with partners, ensuring communication, co-producing change and listening will all help create conditions for positive change.

Learning from mistakes

Conservators can contribute to a learning culture in the way they understand and respond to mistakes. Developing an analytical approach to failure helps conservators shape their influence for future change. Whether diagnosing simple failures in procedure, through identifying that failure stems from a lack of ability or a flawed context up to learning where a challenge is inherently so challenging that failure becomes likely, each of these scenarios requires a different response. A ceramic returned to the lab after a previous repair has failed might be diagnosed as a poor selection of adhesive compounded by a tendency to consider only a small selection of 'go-to' adhesives. Alternatively, the failure might arise from the fact the conservator was not aware that the ceramic was to be used in a handling collection reflecting a weakness in communication. The efficient diagnosis will support a better targeted programme of change to mitigate future failures.

Don't forget the communication

One pitfall in carefully planned and thoughtfully informed change is that the process of identifying the problem and collecting data to describe it becomes the end in itself. Aim to balance the change process among consultation, strategy formation, goal setting, task definition and action. A danger for conservators is failing to attend to the communication necessary to explain recommendations or even to describe conservation practice that has been undertaken. An example of collecting rather than communicating data in preventive conservation might be the collection of vast amounts of relative humidity data on charts that are only understood by a technical audience. Yet the relative humidity management solutions required involve resources and commitments from beyond the conservation team for whom the charts are not motivational. Much of conservation is hard to perceive by non-experts, whether that is the subtle cleaning of a surface or the smooth operation of an emergency preparedness plan that prevents incidents. Consequently, the successful work of the conservator may be opaque to their colleagues. For conservators seeking change, making the impact of their work available to others is a prerequisite in gaining compliance with their change requests. A failure to change may arise simply because research and planning never

turned to action. Having done the work to analyse the problem and to identify solution the final step is to enact the solution.

Leading change

Change can be led by offering a vision or by issuing instructions and there will be appropriate situations for either modality. Identifying the appropriate approach will be fruitful. Airline pilots and operating theatres utilise strict protocols to minimise harm in high-risk scenarios where many of the variables are known and the current situation can be directly informed by experiences of the past. In conservation contexts, equivalent scenarios could be related to maintenance checks or some disaster response strategies. Leadership by inspiration is an approach that might be enacted by a tech giant looking to identify the next 'must have' product. In conservation this approach might apply where the museum is re-evaluating its relationship with the community or novel solutions are being sought for previously unexplored conservation challenges.

Managers will need to ensure that necessary skills and training are in place to bring the team with them and to ensure there are resources in place for their team to deliver. Managers should identify the rewards from change for others and centre these in their communication (Riley 2015).

If conservators want a place at the table within their organisation or sector, they must be able to understand and share the vision of others with whom they wish to work. Expressing positive support for others is influential. Contributing towards organisational goals beyond those immediately aligned to collection care and celebrating other achievements create an environment in which others can return the support.

Conclusions

The practice of conservation cuts across other activities of heritage organisations: to be effective, conservators must work with others to deliver conservation goals; to develop these goals we must be informed by other people's values and priorities; and to plan our activities we must harness resources that then cannot be deployed elsewhere. When considering the success of conservation interventions, outcomes beyond the traditional concerns of conservation (reversibility, minimum intervention, aesthetics etc.) must be considered to identify whether the conservation intervention aided learning, brought joy, or connected people to experience.

Within conservation practice there will be situations where it is necessary to be uncomfortable to enact change. This may be a result of a negotiation where concessions are made, it may be exposing

conservation decisions to an unprecedented level of scrutiny, or it may involve committing resource to supporting other people's goals instead of single-mindedly pursuing conservation concerns. Asking others to change may make them uncomfortable and communication and consultation may help to identify this and plan mitigations.

In shifting boundaries and horizons, conservators must be open to questioning assumptions and habits which have calcified into apparently ethical but in practice exclusionary approaches. In seeking change conservators should ask if they are seeking to change a single event or a pattern of behaviour and to identify any emotional factors impacting on people's willingness to change. Sharing visions for future outcomes will help others share in the mission of conservation, respecting and supporting the mission of others will enhance cooperative working towards everyone's goals.

Conservators must change how our profession is seen and understood. Engaging with these ideas may contribute to making the philosophical changes in our approaches and principles to work towards a more sustainable and socially adept community.

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