

Our Stories, Our Visitors, Our Selves

A model for looking after front-facing teams when telling challenging stories

Museums and heritage sites can do powerful things when they deal in emotion. By telling challenging and impactful stories, they can inspire change and create new ways of seeing the world. But with this power comes a responsibility to look after all their users, including staff.

When working in emotionally impactful spaces, front-facing staff are grappling three interlinked responsibilities: their responsibility to telling the story and delivering the content, their responsibility to look after visitors, and their responsibility to look after themselves.

As managers, focussing on those same interlinked responsibilities can help you build a supportive culture and ensure your front-facing teams are enabled to deliver the change we all want to see.

Our Stories

Speak with authority, authenticity & empathy

Emotional content isn't all about the facts; but you do have to get the facts straight when training front-facing teams. Making sure the team have a good understanding of the issues will mean they can confidently enter into dialogue with visitors, and start to have those important conversations.

If your story involves people who aren't represented on your team (e.g. it's a project working with refugees, survivors or people who have specific lived experience, include their voices in the story. Aim for collaboration and co-curation, and make sure front-facing teams get to be involved in those conversations (if everyone is happy with this).

Have processes in place to deal with crisis

If a topic is likely to cause severe reactions in visitors, make sure your team know what to do. Mental Health First Aid training or Safeguarding training would be great places to start.

Make sure your team know they aren't expected to be counsellors: their role should be signposting only. Having a handy list of helplines or takeaway resources on site can be really helpful with this.

Make sure your team get input into the exhibition or programme planning. Their expertise in visitor flow can help you plan signage, trigger warnings and rest spaces, which are really important in emotionally challenging spaces.

Our Visitors

Our Selves

Set a culture of openness from the start

Right from the point of recruitment, model a culture of openness when it comes to talking about mental health and wellbeing.

Encourage staff to look after themselves, particularly when working with challenging content and to speak to someone if extra support is needed.

Think about rota patterns, minimising long periods in challenging spaces. Check in regularly to make sure things are working, and that conversations on the floor are not distressing.



The Recovery Room

The Recovery Room is a free resource supporting museums and attractions as we all recover and rebuild after the pandemic. You can find research and resources around crisis management, FOH training, conflict resolution, visitor journey mapping and much more.

Visit therecoveryroomblog.com to explore.