

## CHAPTER 2

# Moving Toward Internal Transformation: Awareness, Acceptance, Action

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When thinking about organizational change, we may conjure images of snails, turtles, or glaciers. Nonprofits, and especially museums, have traditionally been slow to change at operational and programmatic levels. Recent financial pressures, which hit a crescendo with the Great Recession of 2008–09, have forced museums to make organizational change. But changes that focus on the financial bottom line may not fully address what our audiences need from us and what our non-audiences are rejecting about us.

How can the education team develop programming that invites discourse about racial inequity if there are internal exclusionary hiring practices? How can the president/CEO make a public presentation advocating for decolonizing museums while there is little to no collaboration between the museum staff and tribal communities? Believe it or not, these questions remain relevant for 21st-century museums.

Before external change can be inspired and initiated, internal organizational changes are necessary. Getting our own house in order is essential if there is to be lasting and effective change in our relations with our communities. Top leadership and all staff levels must turn inward and consider systems that do not support equity and inclusion by:

- Adopting a structured approach that includes all staff, volunteers, and board members;
- Assessing the individual and organizational biases that may exist in the museum’s work culture;
- Reviewing policy and practice for inclusion;
- Exploring the opportunities for racial bias training and workshops on social inequity and inclusive practices.

This chapter concentrates on attitudes and frames of mind necessary for institutional change. It explores three steps for internal, institutional transformation: awareness, acceptance, and action.

## **AWARENESS**

What do we mean by awareness? We propose that museums must come to recognize and understand the multiple strands of traditional white, male, Western, Judeo-Christian heteronormative ideals that permeate the institutional fabric of most museums. Threaded together, these strands form a tightly woven, change-resistant fabric of institutional racism and a monolithic worldview. Developing an awareness of this systemic phenomenon requires listening, an interrogation of experience, the examination of historical legacies, and distinguishing between impact vs. intent.

### **Listening**

Every organization listens, whether in the design of a needed product or program or in the navigation of critical decisions that form its strategic long-term vision. Running an organization depends upon the willingness to listen and respond to audience need. Listening is much more complicated than simply “hearing” the communication of one individual to another. It is an activity made more problematic because so many people assume that they know and understand how to listen.

### **Interrogating staff experience and organizational culture**

As our institutions listen, they must also actively reflect. Institutional awareness begins with willingness to inquire into the experiences of volunteers, staff, administration, and board members with regard to issues of inequity and injustice within the organizational culture. We must be ready to interrogate our experience in order to unpack conflict and explore ways and strategies to grow, learn, and challenge paradigms.

First, we must fully understand the complex and varied ways that inequity and injustice create problematic work environments for professionals. The history of systemic racism, white supremacy, and monolithic practices in museums is an inward-facing experience as much as it is outward. Since their inception museums have expected their professionals to think a certain way and act a certain way, which has created the monolithic culture we now aim to rectify.

### **Examining historical legacies**

In addition to listening to and to interrogating our organizational culture, we in museums must examine fearlessly historical legacies that continue to resonate in our institutions.

### ***The Legacy of Colonialism***

As we know, museums have their origins generally in Western culture, and specifically in Western colonialism. The spoils of colonialism are the basis of collections in art, history, and natural science museums that are on display to this day. Generally, we do not refer to the origins of our collections when we display them, concentrating instead on the exhibition story that we want to tell through objects. However, as many have affirmed, the characteristics of colonial acquisition are part of the history of our collections, and these characteristics persist in the minds of many of our visitors, especially those whose current lives, or those of their ancestors, were affected by colonialism. These colonial legacies include acquisition by violence, conquest, and occupation; cultural, economic, and political domination; cultural oppression and appropriation. (Clifford, 1988; trivedi, 2015).

How might a museum go about examining this history?

- Reach out to local communities with members affected by these practices; ask for their help in researching their history and for their advice in working to acknowledge and somehow address rifts caused by this history.
- Create programs that bring in scholars, artists, and community members to explore, discuss, and help reinterpret or redisplay objects.

### ***The Legacy of Racism***

Although institutional practices of racism such as slavery, segregated public spaces, Jim Crow customs, or red lining have been illegal since the 1960s, the historical effects of these racist practices are part of the history of most museums, especially those that are 50 or more years old. As such this history must be examined and acknowledged. Many people of color living today, especially African Americans, were alive during the era of segregation and Jim Crow, and their memories of this period may affect their visitation and travel to certain areas of cities and towns. Museums must investigate historical legacies, such as:

- Their physical location in town or city; are they in an area previously affected by racial segregation or redlining? Was their community a “sundown town?” Did the museum acquiesce in these practices?
- Was slave labor involved in building the museum?
- What is the origin of funds used to found the museum? Plantation wealth? The slave trade?

- What were their policies toward audiences during eras of slavery, segregation and Jim Crow, the Civil Rights movement, up to the present?
- Cities such as Tulsa, Detroit, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., experienced severe racial violence in the 20th century (1920s–60s), with entire black communities being attacked and obliterated. Was the museum in existence then? What was its stance?

### ***The Legacy of White Privilege***

As institutions built on the pattern of our larger culture, museums are typically places of white privilege. White privilege has less to do with wealth or prosperity than with a common, accepted way of looking at the world that pervades U.S. society.

“White privilege is like a weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks . . . ; an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was “meant” to remain oblivious . . . I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage . . . Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow them to be more like us” (McIntosh, 1989).

All aspects of museum organizational culture—from the mission statement through board, administration and staff to collections, exhibition themes, educational programs, advertising and social media—must be evaluated in terms of their reinforcement of white privilege.

### ***Examine the difference between impact and intent***

Since systemic racism is often presented coded, one strategy for decoding, understanding, addressing and challenging racist frameworks is to consider the importance of *impact* as opposed to *intent*. As museum professionals we pride ourselves on our *intent* towards inclusion and diversity. Regardless of how well-intended our practices may be, we must always consider the actual and perceived *impact* of said practices.

In the simplest terms, while an individual or institution may *intend* to do good, the *impact* of their actions may be harmful. For example, concerned for his daughter’s safety a father tells his daughter that she’s not allowed to use power tools. The daughter, honoring her father’s wishes, does not develop an interest in building and later in life, does not pursue courses or a career in

engineering. The father's *intent* was to protect his daughter, but his *impact* was to dissuade her from her potential to learn and create.

No one in this field *intends* to be racist, but there can still be racist impact.

One of the most common examples of problematic *intent* vs. *impact* in museums is the idea of the Museum Voice: the goal of having the entire museum be on the same page regarding mission and purpose. While the *intent* in the creation of the Museum Voice is to provide structure and consistency in all Museum projects, publications, etc., the *impact* is often the creation of a monolithic culture which prevents diversity of perspectives.

### ***Examples of monolithic vs. empathetic frames in museum organizational culture***

**Monolithic Voice Frame:** An underrepresentation of workers of color in the Museum Voice is accepted as an unfortunate casualty because the museum's identity needs to be clear, concise and consistent throughout.

**Racial Justice/Empathetic Frame:** Racial segregation is not natural; rather, it is a result of biased museum practices and is the ultimate form of whitewashing—the complete exclusion of workers of color from the museum. Proactive policies and enforcement that ensure access to the identity of the museum are critical to creating an empathetic environment. The inclusive museum, empathetic to all people who work within it, values diverse perspectives and multiple streams of input throughout all its practices.

Understanding how systemic racism and monolithic practices are actively enabled in everyday experiences requires empathy and self-assessment. **Use the Museum Voice scenario in the workbook to explore ways to interrogate experience, unpack the conflict and find ways to challenge paradigms.**

### ***Identifying and unpacking conflict***

Consider:

- In thinking and acting empathetically, in what ways does this interaction support a monolithic environment, stemmed from systemic racism?
- Is anyone in this interaction imposing dominance? In what ways?
  - Are they excluding the input or perspective of others?

- Are they enacting a supreme approach?
- Are they—intentionally or not—exhibiting privilege to the discouragement of others?
- Is there evidence of coding, bias or complacency with status quo?
  - Do any of these issues support a legitimate identity and negate another?

Consider:

- What are the implicit biases?
- What do these biases indicate?
- How do these biases contribute to the organizational culture?
- What is the potential impact of an empathic workplace?
- How does this contribute to the “bigger picture?”

## ACCEPTANCE

As a museum comes to understand the depth and breadth of its culture of white privilege and oppression, it will (we hope) come to accept that this legacy is real and that it no doubt has an impact on patterns of visitorship and engagement, especially from communities of color. This is an area that is ripe for further research and investigation by the field.

The following principles can aid the process of acceptance:

**Acknowledge that Words Really Matter.** Terminologies that describe social and racial justice in museums are as complex as the work itself. The words we use in museums to talk about race, equity, and inclusion are often markers of experience, action, and nuanced understanding of where our institutions are in their process. The power of words to engage, alienate, excite, or caution, and how these words are used, can be defining tools for activating organizational awareness and staff/visitor/board engagement. They define both internally and externally the institutional value of this work.

For practitioners, we know that terms change frequently. Much like technology and social media, the new terms reflect dynamic cultural shifts and trace the evolution of the ways we think about and articulate these complex topics. Awareness about the social construction of race and the role of cultural institutions in affirming and perpetuating systems of privilege is a powerful subtext that informs museum board, staff and visitor perceptions.

When people use terms that are no longer relevant, or use words that don't accurately describe the complex subtleties of this work, there is greater opportunity for misinterpretation, polarization and alienation. Let's assume people enter into this work with the best of intentions. Even so, when someone uses an outdated term, it can change the conversation. If two colleagues are in discussion and one uses a term that is antiquated, the conversation shifts. They are no longer speaking the same language or understanding things from a similar perspective. We are not suggesting that concepts of equity and inclusion are linked solely to terms, however terminology often reflects the level of awareness of an individual or an institution. Be sure to check to glossary of terms.

### **Gather and share resources.**

During this time of prolific political and cultural change there are many groups focusing their efforts on reflecting the socio-political climate and socio-political events not being addressed within majority museum culture. Pop-up exhibits, blogs, museum actions, and programs are being organized to acknowledge and address these shifts. Numerous social media sites are designed to engage and support museum staff and visitors by sharing resources.

### **Amplify your work.**

Amplify your work through collaboration and involvement in one or more of the above initiatives for social justice in museums. Increasing the capacities for cultural transformation in our institutions, transformations that mirror the social and political climate of events taking place all around us, is vital. Large and small disruptions are increasingly ubiquitous. Now, more than ever, it is essential that we use these disruptions as opportunities to catalyze, build upon, and amplify our work. This can occur through work within our institutions and through collaborations, initiatives, blog posts, articles, conference presentations, etc. that connect us. Amplification holds the potential to be reciprocally beneficial, illuminating our combined efforts and commitments, supporting courageous acts of honesty, and attracting more people to actively engage in and inform the process.

**Engage in curious inquiry.**

Adopt a posture of curiosity or a pedagogy of inquiry—in other words, you learn from asking questions. This posture is directly opposite to the role of expert.

**ACTION****Practice active listening.**

Active and equitable listening requires the action of engagement and focus on all perspectives impacted. The role of the listener is to allow space for information to influence action. Listening is a skill that can be nurtured regardless of the identity, background or status of the listener. It is perhaps the most fundamental skill necessary in decentralizing what Chimamanda Adichie calls, “The Single Story,” i.e. the monolithic pattern of ideas discussed above. The one story unconsciously affirms this pattern. The behavior of listening requires a capacity for ambiguity and objectivity. For the purposes of moving towards organizational change, it demands a willingness to subsequently change upon hearing new information..

The main reason that listening fails is that it is not a consistently valued leadership tactic. To inspire change, increase effectiveness and develop organizational capacity the orientation of most organizations will follow the “great man theory.” Thus listening to the words and directions of one strong and forceful leader will propel success and sustainable development in an organization. As a strategy, this eliminates the need for multiple perspectives or community engagement as a tactic to direct developing processes.

However, in the pursuit of organizations aligned to social justice orientation the practice of listening creates the strongest mechanism of change.

In terms of measuring the success of listening the competency of the listener is key. Here listed are the most notable skills of a listener:

- Posture
- Engagement/Focus
- Questions
- Openness
- Reciprocity
- Silence
- Reflection



Of course, listening posited in this way can elicit discomfort as it greatly deviates from established patterns of communication at so many museums, theatres, sites and galleries. This is an action grounded in our shared humanity and orientation towards dignity. This straightforward approach to naming an issue and listening to responses without judgment or distraction demonstrates a commitment to exchanging ideas as fundamental to our collective practice.

Consider:

- Using modes of conversation that avoid **absolute statements**
  - What **absolutes** have come to define the work that we do?
- Developing **seed conversations** that move issues forward
  - Actively and regularly talking about our enacted systemic racism to **increase awareness** and activate an inclusive environment
- Regularly self-assessing the organizational culture through the interrogation of specific experiences

### Challenge paradigms, enact systemic change.

#### **Conceptualizing a New Museum:**

The Museum, empathetic to all people who work within it as well as the community outside, values diverse perspectives and multiple streams of input throughout all its practices.

Action and advocacy: What are ways to operationalize social justice in the internal organization?

How do our mission statement, inclusive design, strategic development, board development, staff onboarding process reflect inclusion and equity?

How do our external communications, marketing materials, the way we approach partnerships, all reflect our values of inclusion and equity?

#### ***The challenges of a systemic shift***

As we work to address and challenge systemic racism in our museum workforce, we invest in a **systemic shift** throughout our practice. A systemic shift is realized when “systemic solutions move beyond prescriptions for one-time ‘sensitivity’ or ‘diversity’ trainings” and move towards considering the museum institution at large.

While a systemic shift purposefully defies stereotypes and bias, its progress is not measured in the changes of individuals, but within the institution as a whole.

Systemic shift occurs when:

- We shift our efforts and attention from **intent** to **impact and outcomes**.
- We interrupt policies, practices, and ideas that are seemingly “race-neutral” but are in fact discriminatory.
- We involve the conscious consideration of all people across all museum practices.

We create a workforce culture that does not expect **assimilation** but **actively and consciously** welcomes multi-streamed inclusion of ideas.

Museums must absorb, understand, and accept both the existence and the long-term impact of their multiple legacies in order to transform themselves internally. This is so for a number of reasons:

In the words of Faulkner, “The past isn’t dead; it isn’t even past.” We can see that much of the turmoil in the world today has its origins in the legacies of 15th–19th-century colonialism, in the continuing impact of centuries of slavery and racism in the U.S., and in the political and social tremors begun in the two world wars of the 20th century, which reverberate in the 21st.

Museums, as part of the cultural infrastructure, are not immune from these historic social forces.

—These legacies live on in specific decisions about hiring, collections, programs, etc., but more importantly they abide in the **systems** by which museums operate and through which they view the world and their mission in it.

—These systemic legacies are very difficult to recognize; as a part of the general culture in which we live and breathe, the assumptions that underlie these legacies are mostly unquestioned; they seem to be simply “the way things are.”

—Stepping back and examining the legacies and assumptions on which our institutions are based is difficult because:

- It takes time and effort to research and peel back the layers of history.
- It will require admitting to some ugly beliefs and actions.
- It will involve a redistribution of power, policy, and procedure in our institutions.

- It will take time to analyze and connect to current practice how both general legacies of injustice for your museum, e.g., how Western colonial practice might have shaped your collection, as well as specific aspects of your museum that might affect how your community responds to it (where it is located, how it advertises, etc.).
- Self-examination is often a painful process, even when done privately; this type of institutional self-examination will be more public and will require great transparency; it is this transparency that can help affect the disappointing dynamic that museums have with many communities.

Identifying and accepting these historic social forces, analyzing and understanding how they affect our institutions' relationships with communities that are outside the realm of white privilege, and taking steps to implement them are all difficult and long-range challenges.

### **Sustaining the Change**

How to make this last? With staff turnover, the players will always change. Developing recruitment and interview strategies is critical. And it's equally important to design policies and practices to ensure that organizational change will last beyond the players' (trustees, staff, ED) involved at the time of first approval and implementation.

Beyond structural change, the museum's budget needs to annually support the cost of change. Training, research, and consultation needs to be current and relevant to organizational needs and strategic directions.

Ensuring that you're making lasting change, regular management and review of new systems is critical. When staff, board, and volunteers are recognizing this new system as regular operating practice, you have a metric.

## CASE STUDY

### **Sustaining Systemic Change at the Abbe Museum, Bar Harbor, Maine**

**By Cinnamon Caitlin-Leguto, President/CEO**

Founded in 1928, the Abbe Museum's mission is to inspire new learning about the Wabanaki Nations with every visit. A historic confederacy of tribes, the Wabanaki are the Micmac, Maliseet, Abenaki, Passamaquoddy and Penobscot. At the Abbe their stories are showcased through changing exhibitions, special events, teacher workshops, archaeology field schools and craft workshops for children and adults. Native community members are actively engaged in all aspects of the Museum, including policymaking as members of our Board. The Museums greets 30,000 visitors each year with seven year-round staff members and around a dozen seasonal staff. In recent years, with broad community support, we have grown from a small trailside museum, privately operated within Acadia National Park, to include an exciting contemporary museum, opened in 2001 in the heart of downtown Bar Harbor, Maine.

This transition to a two-location museum was not without difficulties. After a succession of leadership gaps and challenges at the board and staff level and financial pressures, the Museum's relationship with the tribal communities began to fray at the edges. A new president/CEO joined the museum in 2009. She focused on the financial challenges while putting a plan in place for greater tribal collaboration by creating a standing Native Advisory Council (NAC). The NAC members are appointed by tribal leadership, two members from each community in Maine.

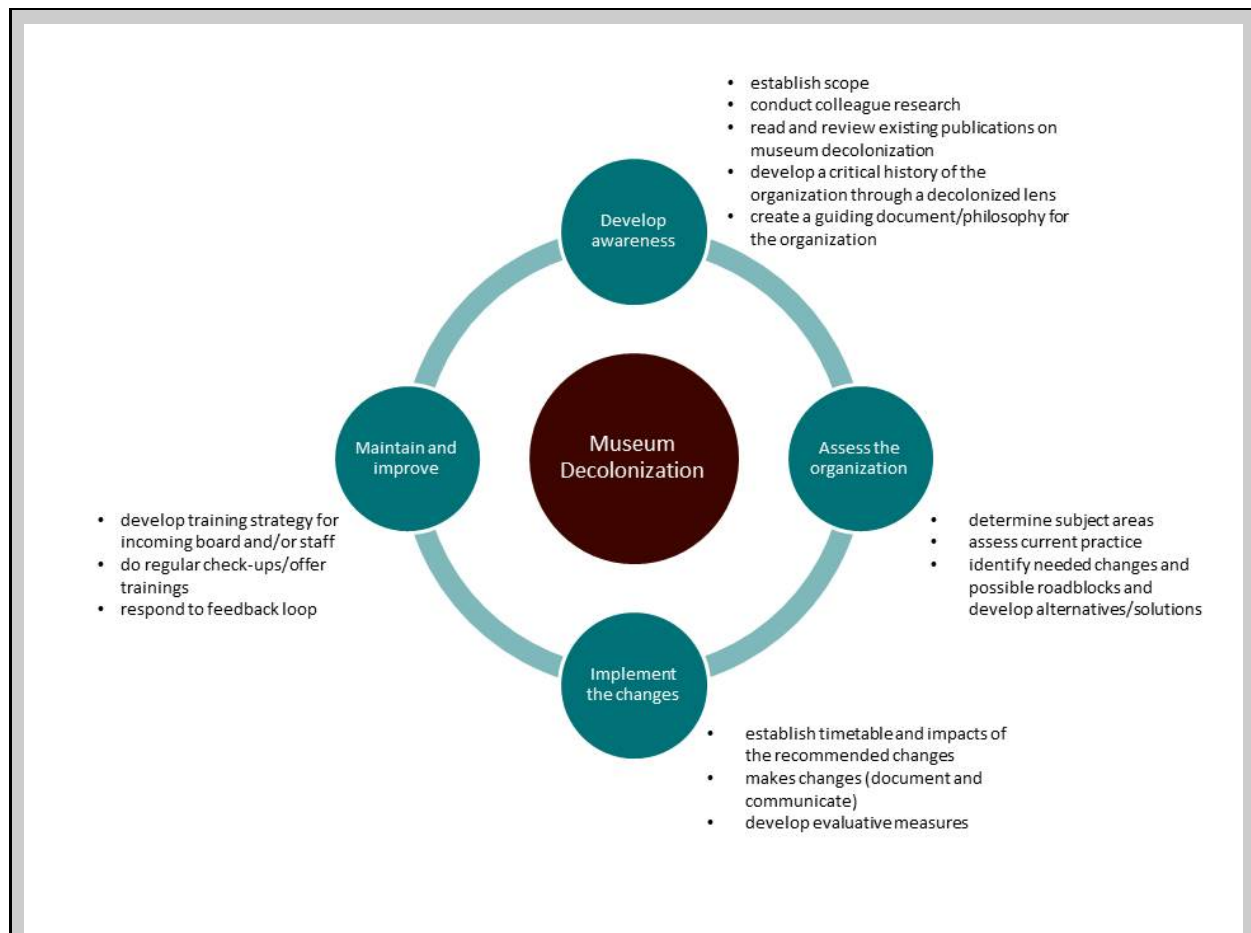
Meeting annually, the NAC works closely with Abbe leaders to craft policy and practice and consult on projects as they are developed and implemented. While the NAC was forming in 2011, the Abbe's governance committee was working to recruit trustees who were supportive of collaborative work. All seemed well until the first recommendation for change came from the NAC to the Trustees. During a regular board meeting, the recommendation was presented to increase Native representation on the board by having each tribal chief appoint a representative to the board. Division quickly developed with a significant contingent of the board having serious concerns about this recommendation. After this meeting, we hit pause. There was clearly more work to be done, and we needed to take some time and back up, making sure that everyone involved was working with similar understandings and frameworks.

In late 2012, the Abbe Museum Board of Trustees established a Decolonization Initiative (DCI) and Task Force. The Initiative was an outgrowth of the 2012 Board Annual Retreat, facilitated by Jamie Bissonette Lewey, Abenaki[1]. During this retreat, trustees and staff studied cultural and political sovereignty and developed a deeper cultural understanding of its importance—sovereignty defined means the ability for a cultural community to be responsible for its people and sovereignty cannot be given or taken away.

An outcome of the retreat was a commitment from trustees and staff to better understand Wabanaki culture, history, and values; examine the Abbe’s museum practices at every level to see whether, in what ways and to what extent, they reflect those values; and, take steps toward practices that embody this commitment. In our discussions following the retreat, terms like “colonialism,” “colonization,” and “decolonization” surfaced, suggesting a framework for engaging this commitment.

During its initial convening, the Task Force considered the scope of its work and identified key concepts that underpin the discussions board and staff are having. The DCI Task Force identified sectors of museum operations that must be considered in the decolonization process: collections, operations, governance, strategic planning, exhibits, advocacy, educational programming, and events.

As we developed our decolonizing strategies, we realized that we had developed a pathway, and one that other museums could follow. While it was initially linear in design, decolonizing practice develops in phases. As we moved through the phases, we found ourselves doubling back, skipping ahead, and using the pathway in much more flexible and organic ways. The following graphic demonstrates the work more accurately.



Abbe board and staff find the scholarly work of Amy Lonetree, Ho-Chunk, especially useful in helping us understand what it means to decolonize a museum. From her academic writings, the Task Force identified three decolonizing practices to guide board and staff:

- Decolonizing practices at the Abbe are collaborative with tribal communities. This means that when an idea for a project or initiative is first conceived, we have a conversation with Native advisors and make sure it's an activity that we have the right to share or pursue. We don't get halfway down the planning timeline and then check with Native advisors about how we're doing and if we're getting it right. Native collaboration needs to be at the beginning and threaded throughout the life of the project.
- The second characteristic of decolonizing museum practices is to privilege Native perspective and voice. The vast writings on the human experience are, without little exception, written by white academics and observers. When we begin to prioritize the

accounts and observations of indigenous scholars and informants, the story broadens, expands, shifts, and brings clearer and non-oppressed perspectives of Native history and culture.

- Decolonizing museum practice includes the full measure of history, ensuring truth-telling and the inclusion of difficult stories. Histories of Wabanaki people connect to today's challenges. Issues around water quality, hunting and fishing rights, and mascots are connected to the past and the present. When we present this full history we have a better opportunity to identify harmful statements and practices.

**Abbe Working Definition: Decolonization means, at a minimum, sharing governance and authority for the documentation and interpretation of Native culture. Decolonizing practices at the Abbe are collaborative with tribal communities, privilege Native perspective and voice, and include the full measure of history, ensuring truth-telling.**

The Abbe Museum is committed to developing decolonizing museum practice that is informed by Wabanaki people and enforced by policies, managed by protocols, and overseen by inclusive governance structures. We will have structures in place that maintain this commitment to decolonization, regardless of the players involved – meaning the staff, trustees, and advisors.

The work of the Task Force evolved into our strategic planning process. Approved in 2015, the plan makes a clear commitment to decolonization by adopting it as our vision statement, “The Abbe Museum will reflect and realize the values of decolonization in all of its practices, working with the Wabanaki Nations to share their stories, history, and culture with a broader audience.”

Moving forward, the board converted the Task Force to a standing committee that relies on work groups to develop policy and protocols. In addition to our internal work to create museum decolonization practice, the plan identifies three goals with specific strategies for sharing the work we're doing with the museum and history field. The plan defines our operating budget priorities, resulting in an annual financial investment in decolonizing work.

The board and staff continue to be committed to learning and we invest in this as well. Each year we offer racial bias training for all seasonal staff, new staff, and trustees. To help us conduct difficult conversations with each other and our audiences, the museum staff have completed two rounds of dialogue facilitation training with the International Coalition for the Sites of Conscience. And, at nearly every board meeting, we invite guest speakers to teach us about new research or to consider a new decolonizing strategy. Most recently, Amy Lonetree visited the museum to share her observations and expertise. To follow our work, you can visit our strategic plan and blog at [abbemuseum.wordpress.com](http://abbemuseum.wordpress.com).

[1] Jamie Bissonette Lewey, Abenaki, coordinates the Healing Justice Program for the American Friends Service Committee in New England and she is the chair of the Maine Indian Tribal State Commission. She is one of the founders of the Healing and Transformative Justice Center that gathers, supports, and shares essential healing methodologies. She also sits on the board of the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute, which focuses on the needs of families who have lost their children to the gun violence in Boston. Since this training, Jamie has joined the Abbe's board of trustees and continues as a key resource for developing decolonizing museum practice.

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