

Compromise in Conservation and Exhibit Decision Making

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Image



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Skillful and responsible collection management within museums, libraries, and archives involves developing, preserving, and using collections for the benefit of humanity. Staff in these institutions might expect a cooperative and collaborative teamwork approach to the delivery of these duties. Yet experience often defies such optimism, as staff may find themselves in conflict with others while seeking to deliver their part of the mandate.

In these cases, parties may either try to overrule each other's needs or, perhaps more commonly, compromise to partly achieve their operational goals. Such compromise, in turn, leads to concessions and a sense that everyone has had to sacrifice part of their agenda to achieve institutional goals. Many conservation concerns demand critical specifications, so modifying a requirement by changing a specification from "far outside critical threshold" to simply "outside critical threshold" is of little or no benefit to the collection. This leads us to ask whether there is an alternative to compromise.

In this article, rather than using compromise between separate goals as a collaborative tool, we discuss optimizing toward a common goal. We aim to shed light on several habits, perceptions, and the intuitive default thinking common among conservators that may unconsciously underpin the creation of conflict during multi-department collection decision-making. By becoming familiar with, and aware of, these perceptions (many of which we define and explore in this paper), we can improve our chances of optimizing outcomes that truly benefit a broader range of needs within the institution as a whole while minimizing perceptions of losers and winners.

In a collection management context, conservation and access are often portrayed as being in conflict. In this paper we challenge the idea of compromise as a default or benign tool in conservation decision-making, using the perception of "preservation vs access" as our case study. Although the examples in this paper are drawn from that perceived conflict, the lessons are broader and could be used to inform changes in practice across cultural heritage organizations.

Deficit and Asset Thinking

Deficit-based thinking (DBT) refers to a tendency to think about improving systems in terms of identifying and rectifying deficiencies. In DBT, the decision maker has a problem-seeking focus which is polarizing and demotivational. DBT is a blame-based system that focuses attention on what can be lost and, by implication, encourages us to allocate the blame for a current or potential issue to others or internalize it ourselves. It is normal conservation practice to imagine future risks and pre-emptively manage them. Combining this with the common (mis)perception that use increases risk creates the problematic mindset that conservation and access are in conflict. This fosters a mindset of focusing on problems, that is, adopting a deficit-based thinking approach.

In contrast, asset-based thinking (ABT) encourages us to make small shifts in perception and thinking to focus on what is possible. ABT encourages the decision maker to begin by focusing on the people and/or resources that can generate desired outcomes, identifying strengths, and seeking creative ways to focus on the possibility of what might be. ABT encourages you to search for opportunities associated with a situation; it encourages a positivity bias that moves from a concession mindset to an optimization one. Focus shifts from what might be characterized as wrong (such as adverse relative humidity, children touching collections) to what could also be positively valued (increase in visitor numbers on a rainy day or children enjoying collections).

Consider how the COVID-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis have caused many organizations to rethink their priorities and opportunities. Such situations can be perceived as limiting opportunities for conservation benchmark, but by using an ABT approach, perhaps these circumstances facilitate time to work on the collection's combined conservation and sustainability policy and to revisit collection care targets. Such discussions may both reduce energy consumption and reframe how conservators are viewed, becoming positive team players in the institutional mission.

Some loss is inevitable

Conservation is often thought to have the aspirational goal of striving to preserve collections for all time. In sustainable systems without unlimited resources, decisions must be made about their allocation. A “forever” perspective has significant limitations on developing conservation goals that allow for/include access. For example, restitution goals may instigate consumption of a collection’s resources partially addressing past exclusion. The “some loss is inevitable” approach may require conservators to reconfigure the urge to keep items off exhibit by considering wider benefits of social equity.

Heuristics and Biases Affect our Strategy Choices

Evolution has molded our brains for the default use of heuristics—simple rules of thumb for thinking. These heuristics have created many tendencies in our thinking that, while good for survival in general, sometimes have specific and significant disadvantages. Analyses of heuristics remind us that our decisions—even the ones we feel confident about—can lead to unintended adverse outcomes. Our full paper considers a selection of these default decision-making strategies and offers examples of how they play out in conservation decisions to identify opportunities to move from compromising to optimizing. Here, as an example, we describe one of these, “the affect heuristic.”

Our sense of an object’s importance can depend on the emotional impact associated with it, known as the affect heuristic. Emotion is an accepted feature of the cultural heritage discourse, but its place in conservation decision-making is often relegated to below the more apparently rational concepts stemming from reductionist scientific practice. Yet emotion plays a huge, if often unacknowledged, part in decision-making, including in conservation. The affect heuristic captures how our feelings work, automatically impacting our judgment. The emotion that we feel can shape our judgments even where numerical data and calculated expressions of value offer differing information.

How might this materialize in decisions concerning collection care and access? The image below shows a librarian sadly examining the hole resulting from illicit clipping of a newspaper in the library’s collection. The library communication team knew that the visual rendition of the damage was upsetting, using it in a newspaper story to communicate to the public why the archive room had been closed to visitors. This one clipped-out article represents a loss of probably less than 0.001 percent of the library holdings; the technical account of loss is less influential than the emotional one.

The affect heuristic can also work against logical decision making. For example, the power of imagining the damage caused by a sprinkler going off in a storeroom is so substantial that the value of a well-maintained sprinkler system in preventing the spread of fire may not sufficiently offset the power of this visualization. When fire damage occurs, it is also emotive, but it is not as easily attributed to the failure to install a sprinkler system as sprinkler leaks are to their installation.

Affect-led decisions are less available for calm evaluation and are therefore more likely to lead to defensive positions and heightened arguments. Where there is considerable emotion in a situation, people may struggle to look beyond their own battle lines, and the possibility to reframe problems for common gain is reduced.

Technical Versus Strategic Thinking

From specifying humidity levels to designing storage systems, many of the objectives of conservation are technical in nature. For technical problems, drilling into the details is necessary for a successful project—after all, a few centimeters off in a mobile density storage system could spell disaster. In contrast, the core goals of heritage institutions are sociocultural and strategic in service of society. If not carefully integrated into the wider

picture, applying finely honed technical and analytical skills to an institution's strategic objectives could be counterproductive. Analysis based on a description of the smallest technical detail will rarely illuminate a strategic pathway to a better society. In such discussions, conservators are in danger of operating in an isolated technocratic comfort zone. Other tendencies in conservation approaches—such as the desire for perfection often founded on an ill-defined commitment to an abstract future—may also encourage defensiveness.

Beyond Compromise

Compromise is often framed in terms of negotiation—I give a little, you give a little, and we meet in the middle. Within heritage organizations the goals of conservation are often presented as a negotiation where preservation goals compromise other activities; this is unhelpful. As an alternative, if a conservator is struggling to deliver on their own goals and perceives a threat to collection care, they might reframe their needs in light of broader organizational goals and identify positive outcomes such as the societal benefits of an activity they initially believed to include unreasonable risk. Is it a compromise to illuminate an exhibition if it means visitors can better enjoy it? Is it a compromise to relax environmental control requirements if it reduces the climate impact of an exhibition? Describing preservation goals as part of a larger system and recognizing broader organizational objectives both require flexibility in all actors' habitual priorities but empowers us to reconceive our conservation strategies. This avoids a more confrontational approach of compromise that always suggests winners and losers.

Compromise may feel like a virtuous route out of disagreement, but this may not always be the case. Compromise is often mentally associated with monetary negotiations: neither side starts at their limit, recognizing that a move to the middle creates acceptable outcomes for all. This approach is debatable if it is the status quo (rather than funds) that is being challenged. For example, in a restitution claim, a “compromise” might offer a partial or conditional return of finds. This may feel like a win for the more powerful party but represent an unacceptable outcome for the claimants with past inequities left unresolved. In negotiating cool storage conditions for fluid-preserved specimens, achieving a result through compromise of the temperature being nearly below the flash point provides little reassurance. If compromise sacrifices an absolute requirement on the altar of agreement, then broader objectives may be lost. As an alternative approach, we can look beyond compromise, first recognizing the habits and heuristics that so often lead to unsatisfying results.

Take Time for Self-reflection

When we recognize the emotional aspects of our decisions, we can choose to take time and space to pause during such encounters to reflect on our responses. We can ask if the emotion is helpful and where it originated. We can also compare this with the emotional response of others and, by identifying and respecting each other's perspective, find a constructive way to explore options more broadly. When we reflect on our own practice, we should note the areas where we have the most conviction, these might be areas in which we are overly confident and reluctant to consider alternatives. Remember that our judgments based on heuristics can be excellent in some situations and suboptimal in others.

When you find yourself in disagreement with others, ask if it is possible that you are holding close focus on a problem that is being too narrowly conceived. Take a moment to think about stakeholders and their values that might be missing from the equation. We can reframe risk, from focusing on a single potential occurrence to contemplating risk from a continual stream of choices. We should check whether our focus has been drawn to immediate and tangible risks whilst ignoring a steadily accruing risk such as failing to demonstrate the relevance of the collection.

Changing approaches and beliefs, especially those held as convictions, is not easy and is not achieved without open-minded self-reflection. Compromise is not necessarily benign; when approaching a difference of opinion, the best solution is optimization.

This is an abridged version, without references and citations, of the paper [R. Waller and J. Henderson \(2024\). The Problem of Compromise in Conservation and Exhibit Decision Making. Collections, 20\(2\): 298-312](#) . Available at: [The Problem of Compromise in Conservation and Exhibit Decision Making](#)

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