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The Docent as Zoo Ambassador

When did you last visit a zoo? Was it a family outing for children? A return visit to see favorite animals? A celebration? A travel destination? A special informational program? Whatever the occasion, how did the experience broaden your knowledge of the animals you saw?

Zoos used to be museums of living animals gathered for people to see. That is changing.

“Today, zoos are meant to entertain and educate the public but have a strong emphasis on scientific research and species conservation. There is a trend toward giving animals more space and recreating natural habitats.” (National Geographic)

The Oakland Zoo

The Oakland Zoo, in the city of Oakland, California is located in Knowland Park which formerly housed a botanical garden on hilly terrain. This makes the landscaping a special attraction while visitors can also get in some cardio activity as they walk up and down the hills to see the animals. Run by the Conservation Society of California, the Oakland Zoo’s mission is “To inspire respect for and stewardship of the natural world while providing a quality visitor experience.” (Oakland Zoo)



Under the visionary leadership of President & CEO Dr. Joel Parrott, for the past 35 years, the Oakland Zoo has embraced conservation, science, and education. An exciting recent addition to the Zoo experience is the creation of the California Trail high in the hills, more than doubling the Zoo’s size. A number of animals native to California are viewable from the Trail.

To get to the California Trail, visitors are treated to an exciting gondola ride to the trailhead’s new Visitor’s Center. With panoramic views out over Oakland and the San Francisco Bay, the



gondola glides above an important conservation project, the Iinnii Initiative. “In 1873, a herd of bison belonging to the Blackfeet tribe was sent to Canada to avoid slaughter by US ranchers.” This project brings the descendants of the original herd to the Zoo where they are allowed to breed naturally. Some yearling calves and their mothers are returned to their historic tribal home in Montana each year, restoring the stolen herd to the Blackfeet tribe. (National Bison Day)

Zoo Culture

As Performance Technologists, we pay careful attention to the **culture** of the organizations we visit. Organizational culture is “...the underlying beliefs, assumptions, values and ways of interacting that contribute to the unique social and psychological environment of an organization.” (Gotham Culture), or simply, ‘the way we do things around here’.

Critical to the Oakland Zoo’s popularity and success is its culture which permeates all aspects of the visitor experience. Culture is responsible for the welcoming atmosphere and the dedication of Zoo staff and volunteers. The 600 enthusiastic volunteers, as well as the paid staff, speak often of being part of the “Zoo family” that serves the animals and the guests.

Our Zoo Visit

Recently, we were hosted at the Oakland Zoo by our colleague, Launa Craig, who has been involved with the Zoo for 30 years, 19 as a **docent**.

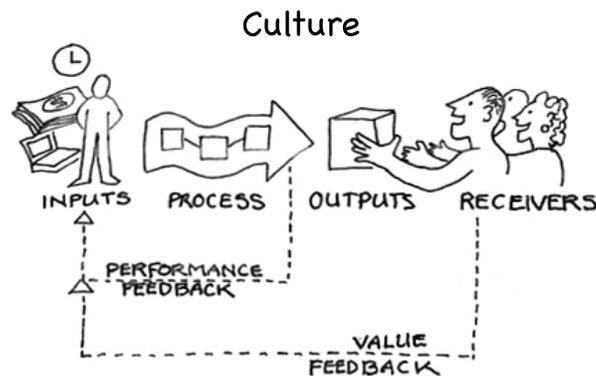
“The title of docent is used in many countries for what Americans would call an associate professor—that is, a college or university teacher who has been given tenure but hasn't yet achieved the rank of full professor. But in the U.S. a docent is a guide who works at a museum, a historical site, or even a zoo or a park. Docents are usually volunteers, and their services are often free of charge.” (Merriam-Webster)

We toured many of the Zoo’s exhibits under the able guidance of Jan Stevens, president of the Docent Council and a long-time docent volunteer, while learning about the Docent Program. We investigated the process that grows a new volunteer into an accomplished docent—a knowledgeable and enthusiastic ambassador for the Zoo.

Docent Process

There are currently 120 volunteer docents at the Oakland Zoo. A helpful way to explore how a volunteer becomes a Docent is through the structure of the **Basic System Model**.

Basic System Model



In the Oakland Zoo Docent system:

- **Inputs** = volunteers, time, funding and facilities
- **Process** = recruiting and selection, orientation, training, skill practices, testing
- **Outputs** = provisional exercises completed, successful guest interactions, tours completed, presentations given, educational sessions delivered, activities hosted, happy Zoo guests, increased community service
- **Receivers** = Zoo guests, Zoo board, project partners, local community
- **Performance Feedback** = tests, instructor evaluations, performance observations
- **Value Feedback** = Guests' comments, online reviews

Here's a closer look at how all the system elements come together.

Recruiting

The Zoo website holds a wealth of information about all aspects of the organization. The Docent section includes the volunteer application, orientation dates, and details about the docent experience. It is a primary source of docent candidates. Others are Facebook, and Zoo member email blasts. Most effective is word-of-mouth referrals. Bi-annual volunteer informational meetings provide an overview of all the Zoo's volunteer opportunities, including docent.

Training

This rigorous program is held for 15 consecutive Saturdays, all day. Each learning segment includes objectives and expected outcomes, homework and quizzes, performance exercises out in the Zoo to demonstrate learning, and a final exam. This is followed by a series of provisional evaluations that may include: conducting a tour for guests, talking with guests during pathway encounters (exactly what it sounds like), being stationed at a particular exhibit to talk with guests and answer their questions.

Instilling Core Values

Docent 'Core Values' are described in the Docent Handbook. Culture is modeled by more experienced docents, and is transmitted through coaching during the training program and the provisional evaluation. Culture is instilled by discussing and carrying out the Zoo's Mission. The training program reinforces the Mission and the Zoo's culture.

Growth Opportunities

People volunteer at the Zoo because they like animals. All docents are equal; there is neither a hierarchy nor any promotional opportunities. Docents are encouraged to assume greater responsibility by taking on officer and committee chair assignments. And, there are always opportunities Zoo-wide. In addition, a docent can decide to specialize by learning more about a particular animal or Zoo program and can ultimately become a go-to resource for that chosen specialty.



Docent Requirements

To become a docent, candidates must:

- Pay a \$100 training fee
- Make a one-year commitment
- Pass a background check
- Learn about all the animals
- Successfully complete a provisional work period
- Have a current tetanus injection and a negative tuberculosis test
- Complete 70 hours of volunteer service with direct public contact each year
- Earn four Continuing Education credits (CEs) each year
- Pay \$20/year for Docent Council dues
- Pay membership fees to the Conservation society of California
- Receive a performance review every three years

Duties

All docents do not perform all duties. They have choices and usually carry out more than one of these:

- Tours for visitor groups, ZooMobile, school presentations
- “Inspire curiosity and discovery” in visitors
- Staff a docent station – an assigned shift at a particular exhibit
- Represent the Zoo at local conservation events, at career fairs, etc.



Retention

We were impressed to learn that docent turnover is very low. Most docents stay a long time and usually resign when walking the hills becomes too challenging or they move away. The Zoo makes every effort to recognize and celebrate the work of their docents:

- Volunteer Appreciation Week includes special treats in different Zoo locations all week culminating in a catered Saturday night dinner with Zoo staff as bartenders, wait staff, kitchen crew, and clean up team
- Docent of the Quarter/Year awards
- Animal pins for years of service, star pins for hours of service
- WOW notes and lots of thank you notes
- Hand-written notes about individual Docent life events
- Birthday celebrations
- Holiday Party
- Ongoing support through Docent of the Day and mentors
- Discounts at the café and gift shop
- Zoo membership discounts

How to be a Successful Docent

The Oakland Zoo has spent years developing, evaluating and enhancing the Docent program. We asked, given all that is offered, what are the practices of a successful docent? As with most jobs, paid or volunteer, flexibility is a critical skill along with a sense of humor. A commitment to the Zoo’s mission is an important element that successful docents demonstrate whenever they are on the job. Being respectful of all staff groups helps docents to establish relationships and learn more about Zoo specialties. And of course, being dependable and patient are vital for success. Finally, knowing when to be self-sufficient and when to ask for help goes a long way in helping a docent continue to learn and grow.

Advice to New Docents

With so much to learn and do as a new docent, we asked what advice a seasoned docent could offer. New docents are encouraged to explore different programs to learn what they like to do, and then find ways to get involved. All docents benefit from attending meetings and reading their email. This is how they keep current, learn about new opportunities, and get to meet new people.

Zoo Culture in Action – The Docent Evaluation Process

The Docent evaluation process is an excellent example of the Oakland Zoo's culture in action. From the individual docent's responsibilities in this process to how the Zoo uses the evaluation results, each step showcases Zoo management's high regard for its docents.

Every three years, docents choose an experienced fellow docent to review their performance. At the scheduled evaluation time, the docent brings a completed self-evaluation form to the meeting. The evaluation includes demonstrating skills and knowledge by doing a tour, station, or a rove with Zoo guests under the observation of the evaluating docent.

The evaluating docent completes the evaluation form and reviews it with the docent. Both docents sign documents and submit them, along with the self-evaluation, to the Program Director of Volunteer Services. The evaluations are analyzed for trends so docent training can be updated as needed.

And a review of the performance evaluations—there are several—provides insight into the skills and knowledge of greatest importance to Zoo management. These include:

- Questions and answers with visitors
- Visitor education about conservation, animals and their habitats
- Recognizing and leveraging 'teachable moments' with visitors
- Effectively correcting undesirable visitor behavior
- Interpretive skills used with guests, tour groups



Your Turn

How much thought do you give to the culture of your organization? Your answer will likely be influenced by your work responsibilities. Organization leaders are generally most concerned about culture and how employees become part of it. With a major organizational change, such as a new group leader or CEO, all employees may be more concerned about how the culture will be affected.

Take a few moments and:

- Identify the culture factors in your system that can help employees be successful
- Specify the culture factors that can derail success
- Determine which culture factors hinder the successful implementation of processes
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It may be helpful to use the Basic System Model to focus on a particular job and then do the exercise.

Summary

In keeping with the transition of zoos from simply living museums to advocates for species preservation and conservation, visitors are offered unique opportunities to learn about the animals from trained and knowledgeable volunteers and employees.

At the Oakland Zoo, the pervasive organizational culture is a direct outgrowth of the Zoo's mission: "To inspire respect for and stewardship of the natural world while providing a quality visitor experience."

A well-trained and dedicated group of volunteer docents are truly the Oakland Zoo's ambassadors, enhancing the guest experience with their knowledge and gracious welcoming manner. The process of becoming a docent is rigorous and carefully designed to impart knowledge about all the animals on exhibit. Docents are the customer-facing agents of the Zoo and use their training to leverage contact with guests to enhance their visit.

The Basic System Model is a helpful tool for determining all the elements of the Docent process and how a volunteer becomes a docent. With extremely low turnover among their docents, the Oakland Zoo can be justifiably proud of how their culture and the Docent program join together to welcome guests.

Authors

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