

## DISCOVERING OUR IDENTITY

### PRACTICAL APPLICATION

- Gather your executive team and ask them:
1. Who do you think we are?
  2. Who does the community think we are?
  3. What do we provide to the community?
  4. What does the community want/need from us?

Take it one step further and ask the community (members, attendees, or people who don't visit your Zoo) questions 1 and 4 above. What have you discovered, and is it in line with your team's thoughts?

## WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO...

**Our thought partners and presenters:** Lochlan Wooten and Christie Vondrak of Riverbanks Zoo and Garden

### WHY **1** CHANGE?

Lochlan, Christie, and their team at Riverbanks Zoo and Gardens had an opportunity for change when the Zoo's longtime director retired and new leadership was in place. **"We wanted to create our new legacy and our new dynamic,"** said Lochlan, Chief Marketing Officer. With new senior leadership they wanted to discover their identity and unique value to the community. Although everyone was doing good work, there were lots of silos. "We thought we were good communicators but learned that we weren't," she said. **"We wanted to figure out what our mission is and make sure everyone has a voice in how that vision is realized."** Together, their team had necessary tough conversations and launched a process to spark positive change.

How did this change happen? Their team took a deep dive and did a full brand audit. Starting with the executive team, they did a Strengths, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threats (SWOT) analysis, which led to the discovery of silos and a lack of communication. Not every team was on the same page as the organization's vision and mission. Lochlan and Christie began facilitating this conversation and created a safe space where people felt they could share. They believed that **"Every person, no matter what the idea, we hear them out."** They even hosted a half-day, off-site meeting for key stakeholders and department directors.

### **2** HOW TO DIVE IN

We can easily assume narratives about ourselves; however, it's essential that we test these against reality. Lochlan spoke often about differentiators, such as: What sets us apart? What makes us unique and what niche can we succeed at in our context? Zoos and aquariums often talk about our identity but there is no single answer for all of us. We must be relevant to our context, which means understanding our community, location, and value proposition. Do we know what we are uniquely good at? And, can we honestly admit to what are we bad at?

### DEFINE OUR IDENTITY **3**

### INVEST IN YOUR PEOPLE **4**

The one thing everyone has in common at Riverbanks Zoo is that they're all connectors: educators, conservationists, and entertainers, to name a few. To create great connections, we must start internally from staff to staff. People need to believe they are valued, listened to and that their voice matters. The team at Riverbanks Zoo found that people who had great connections within the organization leveraged their personal experience to make the guest experience that much more impactful. These connections are directly impacting the Zoo's mission and bottom line. Practically, they moved the guest engagement teams from the education department into the marketing department. It was a difficult transition, but it's made a world of difference! Wording, messaging, and communicating increased in its effectiveness and consistency.

Christie, Chief Human Resource Officer, created an ideas box for questions or ideas to give the executive team for discussion. They also started town hall meetings where anyone was welcome to ask questions. Prompted with candy bars, staff quickly learned they were free to ask anything, even difficult questions. Throughout this process, the executive team learned valuable lessons such as saying no when an idea is beyond the mission or strategy, communicating the why, and being willing to say, "Good question! I'm not sure, but we'll look into it."

### KEY RESULTS **5**

Let's take a moment to think about our brand differentiators. For the Riverbanks Zoo and Garden, it's about creating connections. What other organizations live at the collision point of education, entertainment, and recreation and does all of them well? Our Zoos are equipped with the most unique, impactful and immersive experiences where people can make connections through education, recreation, and entertainment all in the same place-this is a key differentiator!

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