

professional update

From the Chief Executive



Photo: Matt Wreford

THE GLASS CEILING?

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on why it exists and how
Icon might help

I have been musing lately on what appears to me to be a glass ceiling that exists for conservators in the UK. It seems to me that, apart from a handful of high-flyers, conservators tend not to progress up the career ladder beyond the level of Head of Conservation or perhaps the next step up, head of the division in which

conservation resides. Moreover, where are the conservators when it comes to Directors of Museums, Heads of Libraries, or Chief Executives of Archives? And what about heads of non-government departmental bodies, such as English Heritage, Museums, Archives and Libraries Division Welsh Government, Historic Environment Scotland?

If this perception is true what are the reasons for it? Is it that conservators are not interested in these roles? Or is it that conservators do not feel confident enough to compete? Or do they compete but the playing field is not level because the traditional pool of museum directors has always been curators. Or could it be something that is much harder to talk about – class? Are conservators, because they are technical and work with their hands, still perceived as belonging below stairs rather than in the corridors of power?

Or is it something that is not unique to conservators, that faces any professional – scientist, engineer, medic, academic – at some point if you want a top level career you have to accept that you are not going to do what you trained for and love doing, the practical, hands-on work. You are going to be a manager and will spend more time on budgets, fundraising, staff management and ‘politics’ rather than on lovely historic objects, more efficient turbine blades, excising brain tumours and so on, even though enabling others to do these things is a big part of your role as a manager.

At Icon’s recent conference, we held a lunchtime session on leadership. This was led by Katy Lithgow, Head Curator at The National Trust, with Simon Cane, Director, UCL Culture at University College London, and Sarah Staniforth, former Museums and Collections Director at The National Trust, giving short presentations on their careers. It was very well attended. It turns out that many conservators feel that there are indeed barriers to their career progression and more importantly that something can and should be done about that.

Part of the answer lies with ourselves. We need to develop certain attributes, knowledge and skills, for example, understanding of policy and strategy, high level presentation skills, being comfortable with big-picture thinking, courage to take the initiative and to challenge others. It goes without saying that being able to read and understand accounts is vital to progression.

‘Being in the right place at the right time’ is almost always a feature of career progression. However, the lunchtime group recognised the conservator’s need to have a thorough understanding of the job before taking it on (another product of our training). Perhaps we should be less cautious (although our training tells us the contrary) and say ‘yes’ first and then work out how to do it afterwards!

Everyone agreed that Icon could do more to help develop conservators in this direction: promote existing external leadership courses, such as Clore ¹, and provide more and relevant mid-career CPD opportunities to learn management skills. Our keynote speakers both agreed that having a mentor and a peer support network makes all the difference. It would be interesting to debate whether setting this up within the profession would be the most effective way of providing support or whether conservators should join existing external networks, such as the Women Leaders in Museums Network ². It was recognised that whatever provision is made, it should accommodate self-employed conservators as well as public sector employees. Just as Icon has embedded PACR in the conservator’s early career pathway, it is now time to do the same thing for leadership. It is never too early to start preparing for it!

Since the conference, various conversations have been taking place regarding next steps. Among those being discussed are management modules for mid-career professionals and a bespoke leadership course for conservators. I would be very interested to hear your thoughts and ideas.

Although there are few role models to look to, there are some and we can learn a great deal from them. With this in mind, I have set about interviewing as many as I can find to make them more visible to the membership. What I really want to find out from each interviewee is what the barriers were for them and what helped them overcome those barriers, both in terms of external opportunities and internal attributes. You will find the first of these in the next issue of Icon News.

¹ www.cloreleadership.org

² By invitation only