

Walters Art Museum Collections Policy Evaluation

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MSTD-A 516: Collections Care & Management

25 October 2024

Introduction

Statement of purpose, Mission Statement, and Access

The Walters Art Museum (WAM) in Baltimore, Maryland starts the policy off by clearly stating their statement of purpose, their mission statement, and their access policies on the first page. Each section is thorough and explained in clear and concise sentences. However, when compared to the Museums & Galleries NSW (M&G NSW) fact sheet, there is no mention of how and why items may be deaccessioned or disposed (Winkworth 2005, 2).

There is also no mention of the museum's history, or the purpose and significance of their collection stated in the policy. It is mentioned vaguely in the statement of purpose and access sections of the introduction. Marie Malaro states if a museum maintains more than one type of collection “the statement of purpose section may be a convenient place to describe each type and its rationale” (Malaro 1998, 49). Since it is an art museum, there are numerous types of collections they may hold, so it may be in their best interest to clarify what they are exhibiting and storing in their institution.

Authority and Responsibilities

Board of trustees

The museum is required by Maryland law to have a board of trustees. This statement is bolded and directly quoted from the section it is mentioned in. There is a list of decisions they have power to make regarding the collection. This includes acquiring, holding, selling, or disposing of objects. It also includes accepting gifts, donations, or requests on behalf of the museum. The policy has a clear definition of areas of responsibility and who has the authority to make final decisions for the museum (Malaro 1998, 49).

Collections Committee, Executive Director, and Staff

The collections committee, executive director, and staff all have their own sections. They are brief statements that clearly outline their roles and responsibilities in the museum, and who they report to for their tasks. In *Museum Registration Methods (MRM6)*, he states, “Policy statements must be approved by the museum’s governing authority... Procedures are developed at the staff level and are not approved by the governing authority” (Simmons and Kiser 2020, 32).

The committee recommends acquisitions, accessions, deaccessions, and loans, which are overseen by the board of trustees. (WAM 2021, 2-3). The director oversees management of the collections, including incoming and outgoing loans. The director may also delegate responsibilities to the Art and Program Division for managing, protecting, and preserving collections and loans. Lastly, the staff in the Art and Program Division is responsible for the physical care, risk management, and documentation of items in the collection (2021). These sections lay out the responsibilities required by the policy, but they may have procedures that work efficiently based on the staffing and financial standing.

Collections Committee Charter

This section expands on the role the collections committee holds in the museum. It lists four key responsibilities to (1) review and recommend or reject proposals regarding acquisitions, deaccessions/disposals, and outgoing loans, (2) to review all loans, including long-term, to the Museum regularly, at least annually, (3) to review and advise on strategies for developing the Museum's collections, and (4) to review and revise the Museum’s Collections Management Policy at least once every 5 years, or more often if necessary (WAM 2021, 3-4).

The collections committee also has the authority to recommend or decide what to do with items in the collection. These responsibilities include exercising full and complete control over the art and other contents of the museum, preserving and improving the museum, acquiring art and objects recommended for acquisition, deaccessioning/disposing of art and objects, approving outgoing loans, and authorizing the executive director to accept year-end gifts after the last collections (WAM 2021, 3).

The following sections, Conflict of Interest, Schedule of Committee Meetings, Committee Members, Quorum, Revision of Committee Charter, Support Staff, and Reports are all short and limited to three sentences maximum. They are all straightforward and discusses the procedures for what a committee member should do if they have an issue, when they should meet, how many members are on the committee, the requirements of their presence for the meetings, when they can expect revisions, other staff who may attend their meetings, and reporting any actions made to the collection to the board of trustees (WAM 2021, 3-4).

This section goes beyond to be clear about the responsibilities the collections committee has. It also states they may meet if there are unexpected circumstances, but this would be on an ad hoc basis. This section acts as an exceptional reference for expected policies and procedures for the collection committee.

Collections

Scope of Collections

The scope of collections and the museum's history are combined in this section. It reviews the history of the collection while considering its strengths, weaknesses, current uses, and what the museum does and does not collect (Simmons and Kiser 2020, 33). The museum is

named after William Walters, who began the original collection of art. It was continued by his son Henry, and they donated 22,000 works in total. The Walters Art Museum primarily owned European and Asian artwork from William Walters. Henry Walters built upon this by donating Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman artwork. He also donated Russian art near the end of his life (WAM 2021, 4).

The museum and the Walters have openly criticized the past description of the institution as “encyclopedic.” For a long time, it was primarily European art, which does not accurately reflect the 21st-century's way of thinking. They are now described as “a living, evolving civic institution that creates space for dialogue, reflection, and continued artistic creation” (WAM 2021, 4). They have committed themselves to acknowledging their past and shaping a more improved future. The history of the museum is intertwined with the scope of collections, so it is understandable why it is in this context instead of at the introduction of the policy. The collection has now grown into 36,000 items that expand the world and its many cultures to better reflect the museum, their purpose, and mission statement.

Accessioned Acquisitions and Non-Accessioned Acquisitions

This section of the policy is short but is discussed in detail later in the policy document. For now, it goes over legal ownership, and what may happen to non-accessioned collections in their care.

Accessioned acquisitions are made with the museum’s mission in mind, and its collection is made up of artworks with notable artistic quality, or it holds historical significance (WAM 2021, 5). It is made up of Henry Walters Bequests, along with any other artworks that have been gifted, donated, bequest, or purchased to the museum after 1931. The museum takes full

responsibility for the collections in their care (2021, 5). However, the legal ownership of the Walters Bequests is with the City of Baltimore, and the collections accessioned after 1931 is legally owned by the museum. The non-accessioned acquisitions component briefly describes how although some works of art have been acquired, they have not been accessioned, but they have a chance to be for a variety of reasons (2021, 5).

Other Materials and Capitalization and Collateralization of Collections

There are other items in the museum being cared for, too. This includes “the Walters Archives, Library, digital assets, the Conservation Study Collection; and works brought in for installations, incidental decoration of public spaces, or for didactic use in exhibitions” (WAM 2021, 5). They have separate policies, but they are mentioned because the museum is not legally allowed to capitalize, collateralize, or use the collection as a form of revenue.

Acquisitions

This section spans over 14 subsections in total. This, in turn, has made the deaccessioning portion of the policy shorter. An important statement to keep in mind is from MRM6 chapter 3b, stating, “The acquisition policy is augmented by a set of procedures for processing objects that are destined for the collection and those intended for research, sale, or other uses” (Simmons and Kiser 2020, 42). A well thought out accession will not have to be deaccessioned.

Criteria

Accessioned acquisitions and non-accessioned acquisitions have their own criteria the museum staff and collections committee must follow. Most of the requirements overlap with one another but have different wording. The template poses the question, “What story does the object tell about people, places or themes that are of interest to the museum” (Winkworth 2005, 6). In

the policy, the artwork must be of interest to the museum's mission statement, the social, cultural, or educational significance it may hold to their audience, the quality and condition of the artwork, if it can be stored, or if they have the funds to accession it (WAM 2021, 6).

Non-accessioned acquisitions have fewer rigid criteria, but staff should keep them in mind.

Inquiry and Research

Because the original collection bequeathed to the Walters Art Museum was Eurocentric and no longer an accurate representation of the institution, there have been research methods put in place to find the provenance of a potential acquisition. These are stated through bullet points. The curator's research should relate to the authenticity, attribution, provenance, publications, comparable objects, value, and condition (WAM 2021, 6-7). These findings will be presented to the collections committee. Lastly, there is clear wording of who is responsible for documentation and the history of who had title last. In Malero's (1998, 52) collection's chapter, the policy clearly states the procedures that must be followed, who makes the final decision, what records are being kept, when they are being made and by whom, and where the records are being maintained.

Title, Legal Considerations, Warranty, and Indemnification of Purchases

All artworks must have a clear title with no external interest in it that may cause future issues with the museum or the artwork. The museum will also consider the federal US laws in place to protect cultural items. This includes the National Stolen Property Act (NSPA), the Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act (CCPIA), and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA). "Where possible ask the donor to write down the history, associations, context, and significance of the object they are donating"

(Winkworth 2005, 7). With these kinds of requirements in place, the museum can trace back if they are legally allowed to accession an object given to them.

Warranties and indemnities are put in place to protect both the seller and the buyer. The warranty from the seller confirms a clear title and clears the artwork of claims or issues. If there is a breach of warranty, the museum may get a full refund. This is applied depending on the circumstances and the museum and its legal counsel (WAM 2021, 8). This is all in place to assure all parties are acting in accordance with legal and ethical standards.

Gifts, Restrictions, and Bequests

There are three kinds of gifts that can be given to the museum, but they have decided on a general statement. A gift is when the title and complete ownership of an object is transferred over to the museum with no intention of reclaiming ownership (Simmons and Kiser 2020, 43). The museum makes it clear to donors that if they give them a gift, they cannot expect it back. Some gifts come with conditions and restrictions, but the museum makes it clear they will not accept any gifts with restrictions unless it is under specific circumstances. The most common restrictions requested are to keep an object permanently on display, to keep a group of objects in a collection together, to never deaccession the object, or return it to the donor or the donor's heir if an institution decides to deaccession (2020, 44). WAM has no intention of acquiring artwork that has these kinds of restrictions on them.

Bequests are gifts that pass to the museum after the death of a donor under the terms of the donor's will or some other legal document (Simmons and Kiser 2020, 44-45). The museum emphasizes the importance of having the proper legal documents needed to accept a bequest,

including a receipt to show the title has been transferred to them. If a bequest is rejected, the museum may recommend alternative prospectors (WAM 2021, 8).

Approval process

The approval process is broken down into four parts. The curator must first write a detailed proposal that describes the requested work its condition, publication history, importance to the Museum's collection, justification for acceptance, provenance, intentions for display (and/or storage) and publication, and the gift or fund against which the purchase will be charged (WAM 2021, 9). Once accepted, it will be given to the executive director, who will then give it to the collections committee, and they will give it to the board of trustees to approve the request. The director, committee, and board members are required to work together on this process. The museum accepts all-year end gifts, and each accepted gift will go through the same approval process. It is important to note that all objects arriving at a museum must first be approved by the curatorial staff or higher ups.

Promised Gifts and Publication

A promised gift is in the form of a letter or another legal document expressing the donor's intent to donate a specific object to the museum in the future (Simmons and Kiser 2020, 44). The museum will present this document to the collections committee instead of the executive director. At the time of the request for the promised gift, the artwork will be treated as though it is going through the same approval process mentioned above. The museum will electronically publish information and images about the acquisition, including its relevant provenance.

Provenance (Antiquities and Ancient Art, Nazi-Era Provenance, and Human Remains and Culturally Sensitive Materials)

The museum has guidelines referenced from the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) and the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). The collections policy states, “The Museum normally will not acquire an archaeological work or ancient art unless provenance research substantiates that the work was outside of its country of probable modern discovery before 1970 or was legally exported from its probable country of modern” (WAM 2021, 10-11). The acquisition of objects discovered in modern times can be complicated and must be judged on an ad hoc basis. If there is added information about the object, the museum will bring this to the other institution’s attention.

The Nazi-Era provenance is held to the same standards by AAMD and AAM. The museum understands European art donated to them between 1933 and 1945 were more than likely unethically sourced from the Nazi regime. Again, acquisitions will be researched, and judged, on an ad hoc basis. This subject was discussed in our class while on the topic of repatriation, looted collections, and unethical sourcing of objects. Dr. Holly Cusack-McVeigh, “The Collection,” MSTD 516: Collections Care & Management (CC&M), stated, “You cannot talk about collections care and management without talking about colonialism” (class lecture, Indiana University Indianapolis, September 10, 2024). It is imperative for the museum to understand when it is ethical or unethical to accession an object with a problematic past, and for them to handle the situation with care.

WAM understands they more than likely own many artworks that have been looted by the Nazi regime, and they are working to bring light to this through their policy. The museum’s

collection history was dominated by two wealthy men who had a fascination with European art, and their donated collections were primarily acquired from WWII. In the policy, the museum states if they determine an artwork was inappropriately acquired in the Nazi-era, the museum will “make such information public (such as through our website, Nazi-Era Provenance Internet Portal’s website (NEPIP), or AAMD’s Object Registry)” (WAM 2021, 11). This kind of information is crucial to maintaining trust between the museum and its audience, a statement that is emphasized between all three authors.

The human remains and sensitive materials section is short, but it is clear the museum will be in contact with NAGPRA and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) if any of the objects in their possession requires closer cultural examination. In some cases, Native American elders asked museums to safeguard sacred objects (Schwarzer 2006, 88). This kind of responsibility means the museum should stay up to date on laws and reiterate their good standing with the communities whose objects they are housing.

Deaccession/Disposal

Preamble and Principles

The preamble section goes over the laws WAM legally must follow. The trustees can sell any of the museum’s contents they view as of the museum’s interest or value. However, they cannot sell any artwork without the consent from the Mayor and City Council of Baltimore.

There will be times the museum has to deaccession an artwork for a variety of reasons. This section is shorter than the accession portion of the policy because a well accessioned object will not have to be deaccessioned. According to the Collections Policy Template, “To deaccession an object from the collection, assess the item against the museum’s mission, the

collection policy and themes, and the assessment criteria” (Winkworth 2005, 8). The museum will observe the requested deaccession object with scrutiny. There will have to be approval from the curator, the collections committee, the executive director, and the board of trustees. It is rare a Walters artwork is up for deaccession, but there may be times a forgery, a redundant piece, a work no longer appropriate for the museum’s mission, or a work beyond repair will be recommended for disposal (WAM 2021, 12-13). The museum will do their best to respect a donor’s wishes and contact them or the donor’s heir to let them know of the deaccession and disposal. It is stated that it is not a request for permission.

Criteria and Approval Process

An artwork must meet at least one of 10 criteria listed in the collection’s deaccession policy. Some examples include the object is deemed to be of poor quality or insignificant in aesthetic quality, lack value for exhibition or study purposes, the Museum is unable to care adequately for the work because of the work’s particular requirements for storage or display or its continuing need for special treatment, or a competing ownership claim, whether based on ethical or legal considerations, has been found to have merit after the Museum has respectfully and diligently addressed the claim (WAM 2021, 13-14).

The approval process is the same as the accessioning approval process. Staff will first (1) recommend the requested deaccession object to the Executive Director by the appropriate staff in the Art and Program Division, (2) send a recommendation to the Collections Committee by the Executive Director, (3) send a recommendation to the Board by the Collections Committee, and (4) acquire approval by the Board. In the case of Henry Walters Bequest, the Mayor and City Council of Baltimore must consent (WAM 2021, 14). The museum must be prepared to defend their reasoning behind the request.

Method of Disposal, Use of Proceeds, and Publication

There are six ways the museum may dispose of the artwork. They can sell it at a public auction, sell it through consignment, a whole or partial exchange, a direct sale to another museum or suitable institution, gift it to another institution, or return it to the original owner if possible. If none of these options work, the artwork can be used as study material or destroyed.

The funds acquired from the deaccessioned artwork must be used to accession another artwork. These funds will be placed in a restricted account used only for acquisitions. It is not noted in the policy, but deaccessioned artworks will not be given or sold to museum staff, volunteers, board members, or their representatives (Simmons and Kiser 2020, 34). The museum will update their website in a timely manner of the deaccessioned artworks.

Outgoing Loans and Incoming Loans

Principles

All museums have outgoing and incoming loans they use to enhance their collections and exhibitions, and Walters Art Museum is no different. The loan policy should define appropriate reasoning for loans of the collection objects and specify that they be made to other peer institutions and not to individuals or commercial corporations (Malaro 1998, 53-54).

The principles behind an outgoing loan include the enhancement of knowledge and understanding of the artwork by presenting them in a new context, advance art-historical and conservation research, and enable a wider audience to engage in the museum (WAM 2021, 15-16). The principles for incoming loans are the same, but the policy specifies what the loan may be used for. This includes special exhibitions, smaller focus shows, loans brought in for examination and study, and loans placed on deposit with the museum but not on view to the

public (2021, 15-16). The museum allows short-term and long-term loans so long as the artwork fits their mission.

Criteria

There are a lot of criteria an artwork must have to be considered for an outgoing or incoming loan. For outgoing loans, the museum must first take their staff into account. If there is not enough staff, then the outgoing loan will simply have to wait. As stated in MRM6, “It [the policy] should specify physical requirements and security protocols for loans and the criteria for deciding whether to require a courier to accompany a loan object” (Simmons and Kiser 2020, 35). The criteria section of the policy explains it well. The object must be in stable condition to travel, the borrower must be able to meet the museum’s environmental, security, and professional standards (WAM 2021, 15-16). The borrower is also responsible for the safe travel of the artwork and will not possess any objects without a clear title.

Incoming loans will follow the same protocols as outgoing loans, but they will be treated as an acquisition. This means they must scrutinize the object to make sure it is authentic, in standard condition, there are no issues related to provenance, antiquities or ancient art, Nazi-era provenance, it is compliant with relevant laws, and there are no conflicts of interest (WAM 2021, 15-16). Like outgoing loans, incoming loans must fit with the museum’s mission and statement of purpose.

Approval Process

The approval process is done in four stages. The Art and Program Division recommends the loan to the executive director. The director takes this recommendation to the collections committee, and the committee takes it to the board of trustees to be approved. Incoming loans

must be approved by the executive director and Art and Program Division staff, but they can reject the artwork. According to MRM6, If any objects are incoming loans from a direct affiliate of the museum, the collections committee must also approve the acceptance of the work. If a loan is denied, a letter should explain the reason for the denial (Simmons and Kiser 2020, 138). There is no mention of this in the policy.

Collections Care

The museum takes the care of their collection seriously, and the entire staff is responsible for keeping artwork up to conservation standards. They have a deep understanding of how they will provide protection to their works of art through display and storage, security, and environmental control (WAM 2021, 16-17). They understand their role in preserving history. Museum collections are considered cultural, not financial, assets to be held for public benefit (AAM 2019). The museum prides themselves on this, and they allow free and free access to their collections. This can be done on their website, in person installations, educational and public programs, and more (2021). They ensure they are up to code with the ethics of collections and conservation.

Documentation

Records and Inventory

The museum keeps accurate records of all the collections in their possession. A good registration record will include a descriptive catalogue and evidence of legal ownership of the object (Malaro 1998, 55-56). The museum has the identification, location, condition, and treatment of objects updated regularly (WAM 2021, 17-18). They keep records of artwork they no longer have in their possession as well. They keep all paperwork of objects on file, and it is

not allowed to be altered or destroyed without consent from all parties and has gone through the chain of authority.

The Inventory section is short and to the point. As of 2021, the museum inventories their collections every 10 years.

Insurance and Risk Management

Insurance and Risk management

Because of the museum's history, the City of Baltimore maintains the collection's insurance. The head of collections management is in contact with the insurance company's broker to coordinate insurance claims and adjustments (WAM 2021, 18). They will have to work together with the Deputy Director for Art and Program, the Chief Operations Officer (COO), and the executive director.

It is noted that insurance does not work in place of risk management. Risk management is done through collaborative work between all staff. In MRM6, it states, "Collections management policies should address any issues that might have a significant impact on the collections, museum operations, staff, or collection users" (Simmons and Kiser 2020, 32). The risk management section covers a broad range of responsibilities, including security, maintenance, pest management, fire detection, environmental settings, collection preservation, packing, shipping, and more (WAM 2021, 18). When they keep risk management in mind, they will not have to use their insurance as much.

Ethics

Ethical Restrictions Relating to Acquisitions (Appraisals, Personal Collecting, and Buying and Selling Objects)

The museum does not provide appraisals, a practice many museums have adopted. “Museums avoid making formal appraisals, especially at the request of donors or prospective donors” (Malaro 1998, 52). There is an inherent conflict of interest that must be avoided.

Personal collecting is allowed by all staff if they are not competing with the museum for an object. They are also not allowed to take advantage of the information provided to them, and they cannot use their affiliation to their personal advantage (WAM 2021, 18-19). There are circumstances where this may happen, and the museum’s needs will come first.

General staff and board members are not allowed to deal objects that are like the museum’s collection. This means they are selling artwork for a profit, not for an exchange or management of a personal collection. There is a lot of trust between the staff, committee members, and board members.

Ethical Restrictions Relating to Deaccessions/Disposals

Deaccessioned or disposed artwork is not allowed to be given to affiliated staff if it has the chance of giving them an advantage to acquire the artwork. As stated in Deaccession and Disposal, “Using museum resources to maintain inappropriate collections can be an abrogation of the public trust” (Simmons 2006). This will create long-term problems for the museum, and it will more than likely take years to fix it.

Loan of Objects to/by Board Members, Volunteers, and Employees

The loan of objects to general staff and board members is prohibited. This is all that is said in this section. However, the loan of objects by general staff and board members is not prohibited if the collections committee approves (WAM 2021, 19).

Interpretation, Procedures and Forms, and Effective Date/Renewal

This is the last section of the policy, and it is short. The museum will consistently comply with the laws and other policies they have listed throughout the document. It will be updated when necessary, or every five years in response to its original adoption date by the board members (WAM 2021, 20).

Appendix A

This is a list of all the relevant documents, laws, policies, and fact sheets mentioned throughout the collections policy document.

Reflection

After reading the Walters Art Museum collections management policy, I have concluded it is a well thought out and executed document. This is a modern policy adopted on June 15, 2021. MRM6 states, “The policies must be institution specific, and up to date. Complex, confounded, or outdated policies will simply be ignored” (Simmons and Kiser 2020, 32). It has clear and up to date information on their collections and procedures around what responsibilities staff and board members hold. There is also a consistent voice throughout the policy that leaves no room for argument. Each section is well thought and directs responsibilities to the proper staff or board members. All authors promote honesty between the museum and the public, especially when the museum may deaccession an object. They all have the same requirements for outgoing

and incoming loans, and they emphasize the importance of an object enhancing the museum in some way. However, there are several differences I found between the authors and the policy.

The first difference I found was in Malaro's 1998 texts. They are still relevant, but they are older and slightly out of date. Compared to the other two by Winkworth and Simmons, whose works were created in the 2000s, there is little to be said about the digital documentation of objects. Another difference I found was in the loans section of Collection Policy Template. "No objects will be accepted on indefinite or long-term loan" (Winkworth 2005, 9). WAM's loan section states they approve of both short-term and long-term loans. The paperwork involved in this process will have an end date to this long-term loan. Simmons's text on loans agrees no loan should be open-ended, but he makes no mention of disapproving of long-term loans in general. Lastly, the discussion of provenance research is not mentioned in the Malaro or Winkworth texts. The Nazi era provenance of artwork began seeing significant changes during 1998 and the early 2000's. Coincidentally, these are the years the mentioned texts were written. Simmons and Kiser have the most up-to-date readings, so they mention the importance of researching the provenance of collections in museums. Since the policy was written in 2021, they more than likely have access to MRM6 and pulled relevant information from those texts into their policy.

All sections of the selected policy are necessary, especially with the museum's history in mind, but there is information I would recommend being added. The first one I noticed was documentation. With the technology we have today, there is no reason there should not be a section describing the policies behind digitally documenting an object. The museum houses human remains and special artifacts that are preserved or put on display, but they should discuss the policies surrounding them, if they can be photographed, what paperwork someone must fill out to have access to it, and the requirements they must follow should they have access. It would

be in their best interest to add this section to their policy so human remains and sacred objects are not disrespected. The second difference I noticed was their lack of ad hoc policies. Museums understand they must occasionally solve problems on a case-by-case basis, but WAM has more than a few exceptions laid out in their policy. The museum may benefit from being clearer and specific about who may access the collection, and if they are allowed to document the objects for educational purposes upon request. Third, the museum does not discuss the roles of staff for Nazi-era provenance. It is crucial for all staff and board members to know where responsibility of this research lies. “At this time, museum professionals who primarily work in the area of provenance research and related issues are curators, collection managers, registrars, and archivists” (Simmons and Kiser 2020, 71). Curators are not mentioned in the provenance section at all even though they play a significant role alongside their fellow museum professionals. Lastly, they do not mention sending out a letter to the donor if the museum decides to deaccession the word. Wood and Gardner mention this in the MRM6 text, but they are the only ones who have made a note of it. It would be in good faith to send a letter out to the donor, or their heir, to let them know the museum will no longer have the artwork a part of the collection. It may seem small, but museums should always be in good standing with their donors. Not only is sending a letter out to them considerate, a donor may approach the museum at any time to request the artwork.

Overall, the Walters Art Museum has a well thought out collections policy. There are parts that may benefit from being edited, and adding the sections mentioned above may interest prospective donors, audiences, scholars and related museums. They understand their role as an informational institution and how clear communication and honesty will benefit all parties.

References

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