

Personnel Management: Encouraging Effective Interaction

Contributed by AIA Knowledge Resources Staff

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SUMMARY

Often employers will place a mission statement on a wall and assume that the firm's office culture will follow the statement. However, this is not usually what happens. It is important for partners and principals to understand how information flows through the firm and how their actions directly affect the culture of the office.

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

People are the most valuable assets of an architecture firm, yet most firms devote far more care and attention to less valuable assets. Effective, forthright, and respectful interaction are prerequisites of employee satisfaction, commitment, and productivity. There are many ways to improve how we interact, according to Boyce Appel, a management consultant who has specialized in human relations at design firms for more than 30 years. "The things that I'm most interested in are foundational issues that confront a professional design firm. They deal with conflict, culture, climate, performance feedback, how to deal with bad times, and partner politics and dynamics."

UNRESOLVED CONFLICT

Many interpersonal issues are left unresolved until they have mushroomed into serious problems, by which time feelings and attitudes have hardened. Such situations can become unmanageable, and may even lead to litigation. Nearly all such issues, however, can be resolved, or even prevented from occurring, through clear, open communication, Appel notes.

Not all people are naturally equipped with effective communication skills, but most people can learn. The key is to apply the appropriate tools and techniques to get through difficult situations, address them forthrightly, and resolve them to the satisfaction of all parties.

Conflict almost always produces change. Unresolved conflict produces change in ways that may not be desirable and may not be immediately apparent. A person may choose to interact as little

as possible with another person with whom interaction is necessary for both to work effectively, but the underlying cause might not be apparent to supervisors or others.

"The thing that I've noticed is that when things don't get confronted it creates change," Appel says. "Change isn't necessarily bad, but when it's caused by nonconfronted issues, it's usually not a very nice change. People walk away not feeling great about it. My bias is that we ought to be able to reach our objectives absolutely and simultaneously enhance our relationship with the person or persons we're trying to reach our objective with."

It is difficult to be forthright about uncomfortable subjects, and many people in the design professions have little experience or training in behavioral issues. "They spent five years plus learning about the profession, and they didn't have any time for communication processes," Appel observes.

EXPLORE DIFFERENCES

While teaching summer courses at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, Appel had an opportunity to observe the jury critique system, which he finds appalling. "It is so demeaning, so tough. People walk away with one major method of learning, and that is avoiding conflict, avoiding confrontation, and that really is the wrong way to learn. Real learning involves exploration and contrast; exploring differences. That's what we learn from as adults—we don't learn from sameness, we learn from difference," he says.

DO WHAT YOU SAY

Another element of effective human interaction in a work environment is whether a firm lives by its own philosophy. "A lot of firms talk about mission, vision statement, goals, etc., and they put these things up on the walls and in their marketing materials. But the way most firms operate, these things don't [match] everyone's behavior," he observes.

"My advice is, if a goal or vision is written down someplace, that gives the firm a license to strive for

that goal. . . . Too often firms have these lofty goals about ethics, morality, how we deal with customers and clients and each other, and yet you see people operating differently from what that says. It's not okay. The fix is simple but hard to do. Nonetheless, fix it or take that thing off the wall. It's hypocritical."

APPRAISE PERFORMANCE CONSTANTLY

Performance reviews and performance monitoring should be conducted on a regular, frequent basis. Often, employees receive performance feedback long after it is possible for them to do anything about it.

"I don't care what the process is—what you've got to do is sit down and talk about real stuff all the time, not just once or twice a year," Appel notes. "The formal review once or twice a year should reveal no surprises. It should be a culmination of conversations that you've had about your performance. And remember, it's not just the reviewee performing, it's the boss too, because he or she is having an influence on that performance."

TERMINATE WITH DIGNITY

It's a fact of life that in tough economic times, good employees may have to be laid off. Giving an employee the news is probably the most uncomfortable and unpleasant task an employer has to face. Many are reluctant to face it squarely, and as a result, insult may be added to injury. Layoffs rarely come as a surprise to employees; most can see the signs of slowing activity. Providing as much notice as possible, and being direct and honest, is the least that one can do and increases the odds that valuable employees might return to the firm when the economy improves.

SET AN EXAMPLE

"Partner politics" can wreak havoc in a design firm. "It's not in anyone's best interest to play games, and at a partner level it's absolutely not in their best interests to play any kind of games with each other," Appel says.

Too often, though, partners fail to communicate effectively and do play games in which staff can become mired. "So what does that do to the organization? It messes it up. It distracts people from doing what they're really good at doing and puts their minds on stuff that they're not really good at doing, gossiping and rumoring and yakking about what goes on with the partners. A way to deal with it is to have some mechanism that the partners can rely on to deal with their issues in a private way," Appel adds.

LESSONS LEARNED

Consistency and openness is important when dealing with employee relations. Lack of confrontation will adversely affect a company in the long run. It is important to pay particular attention to how a firm deal's with termination and how partners communicate with each other.

RESOURCES

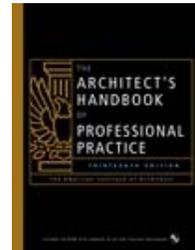
More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 09.01.08 Staff Retention: Five Factors of Employee Satisfaction
- 09.01.09 A Sample Performance Evaluation Form
- 09.01.13 Compressed Workweek

For More Information on This Topic

See also "Managing People," by Kathleen C. Maurel, Assoc. AIA, and Laurie Dreyer-Hadley, *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 9, page 221. The *Handbook* can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by sending an e-mail to bookstore@aia.org.



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