

NBBJ: Success in Leadership Development

Contributed by the AIA Knowledge Resources staff

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SUMMARY

Leadership development is a critical issue for most architecture firms. At NBBJ two programs—Oregon and Leading Change—help bridge potential leadership gaps while increasing the firm’s commitment to its mission. Brigitte Dillman-Cruce and Angie Graves of NBBJ Seattle discussed both programs at the 2008 AIA Grassroots Leadership Conference held in Washington, D.C., February 21–23.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AT NBBJ

NBBJ administers two professional development programs that focus on the firm’s core values. Oregon is the company’s traveling fellowship program, and Leading Change is a nine-month creative leadership development program. The two programs complement the vision of the firm as “artists of change” with “fearless creativity.”

OREGANO

Oregano was the original word used by former NBBJ Principal Pat James to describe his idea for a traveling fellowship program. The word captures what he intended—to add a little spice to life (even though it’s really an herb). The purpose of Oregon is to “recharge the creative well-spring,” to further enhance group dynamics, and to strengthen leadership at NBBJ. The program is intended to be fun, challenging, and stimulating and to provide a flourish of cultural and practical information.

Launched in 1989, the Oregon program represents a significant investment in the development of the firm’s most promising staff members. (Each trip costs approximately \$5,000 per person.) However, both the individuals who participate and NBBJ as a whole benefit from the program. To maximize the firm’s benefit, employees are evaluated for participation on the basis of their long-term commitment to NBBJ; those selected should be regarded as future leaders of the firm. Furthermore, Oregon is a wonderful way to give more experienced staff a chance to rejuvenate their creative energy.



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Program Details

Eight to 20 employees from different studios and different offices around the world participate in Oregon each year. Participants are required to pick a focus topic and to begin researching the topic prior to departure. Upon their return, participants must

- Give a presentation to their studio (and office) on what they learned during the trip
- Host a party for their office
- Write a descriptive narrative on their focus topic
- Provide a minimum of 40 images to illustrate their narrative, as well as copies of any journals or sketchbooks created on the trip, to the NBBJ Media Library.

Since its inception, NBBJ’s Oregon program has sent more than 250 employees to 25 countries on four continents.

For the past three years, the Oregon program has focused on sustainable design. In 2007 participants visited Washington, D.C., in conjunction with a trip to Denmark, in an effort to broaden the firm’s knowledge of and influence on both sustainable design and public policy as it relates to architecture and design.

LEADING CHANGE

NBBJ created Leading Change in 2001 in response to feedback collected from staff members in two extensive surveys. The program is intended to touch everyone at the firm, either directly or indirectly. Leading Change is not a canned development program; rather, it was developed to address the core values of NBBJ and the needs of a dynamic, creative staff. It is about enhancing learning and leadership skills at all levels, and not about rewards or special congratulatory recognition.

In its initial years, the program focused on individual leadership development and project leadership. In 2005 the focus shifted to team leadership, stressing core team (studio management) leadership skills.

Leader and Coach

Leading Change is primarily built around project-based learning, recognizing that it is at the project level where the firm delivers the greatest value. The program demands growth and change from coaches (people in the firm who are already in leadership roles) and leaders (those in the firm who demonstrate leadership potential).

Each leader—whether he or she participates as an individual or as part of a team—is paired with a coach. The role of the coach is to

- Help others learn and develop in concert with NBBJ’s vision and values.
- Ask questions.
- Offer insight and support.
- Provide ongoing feedback on behavior.
- Empower and encourage leaders to fulfill their ILAP and goals.

The role of a coach is not to be confused with that of a mentor; the coaching relationship is a formal structure that has at its foundation a contractual agreement between the leader and the coach that lasts for a defined period of time and which focuses on the leader’s particular goals.

NBBJ expects that coaches, as well as leaders, will grow and learn from participation in Leading Change, and that both will better understand their own skills and behaviors as they relate to the NBBJ leadership model.

Program Details

The key to the success of Leading Change is having a sustained, nine-month program. NBBJ believes leadership training doesn’t “stick” when staff



members are sent to a two-day or week-long program. For success, they must “live” the program in their day-to-day work, where they can practice skills and techniques, get feedback, adjust their actions, and move forward.

Since 2001, more than 200 employees have participated in Leading Change. A steering committee of five senior staff members develops the content and oversees and manages the program. In addition, two external consultants—a psychologist and an adult education specialist—create curriculum, conduct feedback sessions and facilitate learning modules and retreats, and participate as ad hoc members of the steering committee.

The Leading Change program begins with a set of assessments including the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, FIRO-B, StrengthsFinder and a 360° review. Each participant meets with one of the external consultants for a 1-1/2 hour feedback session where they identify areas of leadership development the participant may want to focus on throughout the program. With the results of these in hand, leaders, coaches and the steering committee attend a three-day intensive leadership retreat, which is intended to inspire staff members, expose them to several leadership learning modules, and set goals and action plans for the duration of the program.

As part of the retreat, leaders in the program are asked to create an Individual Leadership Action Plan (ILAP). Goals are informed by their original assessment data, current project or role on a project, and/or leadership abilities they would like to adopt or improve. Leaders work on their ILAP goals throughout the nine-month program with the help of their leadership coach.

Subsequent to the three-day intensive leadership retreat, leaders are expected to meet with their individual coach at least once a month to review their progress on their ILAP, to ask for help in a particular leadership situation, or to practice and get

feedback on leadership techniques. The entire group (leaders, coaches, consultants, and steering committee) meets monthly for a one-hour skill building session focused on new leadership modules (such as conflict management or negotiation skills) or to review progress on their action plans. Coaches meet with the consultants and steering committee every other month to learn about new coaching skills, share ideas and feedback from their coaching experience, or ask for coaching advice from the larger group.

At the end of the program, each leader gives a presentation summarizing what he or she has learned to the Leading Change group and firm partners. If the individuals are members of a team participating in Leading Change, the team presents a Legacy Project—their new group knowledge including processes or procedures they developed during their tenure in the program, and the story of their journey through it.

Philanthropic Aspect

Another component of the program is a commitment to philanthropy. Participants have multiple opportunities throughout the year to engage in the community either through the ACE mentoring program, AIA 150 Blueprint program, or environmental engagement with the Nature Conservancy.

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

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

- 03.02.02 Building Knowledge Through Lessons Learned
- 07.05.03 Three Methods of Knowledge Transfer
- 07.06.01 Three Methods of Knowledge Transfer

For More Information on This Topic

See “Team Building for Architects,” by William C. Ronco, Ph.D., *The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice*, 14th edition, Chapter 4, page 128. The Handbook can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at bookstore@aia.org.



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Key Terms

- Leadership
- Practice
- Personnel management
- Staff development