AIA Best Practices: Leadership in practice

Excerpted and adapted from an article originally published in Practice Management Digest by Hugh Hochberg, AIA.

Summary

Excerpted and adapted from an article origin Hugh Hochberg has identified characteristics prevalent in architect leaders. These leadership traits can be honed and developed over time but often are innately published in *Practice Management Digest* by Hugh Hochberg, AIA.

Defining leadership in architecture

Successful leaders in architecture firms do just that—they lead. How do they lead? They lead by:

- defining and communicating values and direction (vision)

- enabling people to grow, advance, and satisfy themselves professionally

- setting, communicating, and living up to high standards

- communicating and achieving balance among the firm's professional, cultural, and business aspects

- bringing clients and projects to the firm—either directly or indirectly

Although the two concepts must coexist, leadership and management are not the same and it helps to understand the distinctions. Management confers authority on individuals, whereas the influence that comes from leadership can only be earned. Leaders earn their influence because people want to go where the leader is headed.

In design firms, the people who rise to positions of significant leadership generally will demonstrate many, if not all, of the following characteristics:

- The ability to establish and communicate a clear vision for the firm's future, including the type of clients and projects sought, the role of design in achieving client and firm satisfaction, technology choices, financial goals, professional gratification, internal culture, external image, and social, civic, and environmental involvement.

- The energy, focus, and commitment to inspire others to embrace a common vision and to work toward its attainment. That inspiration is reflected in the work the firm pursues, the talent the firm

recruits, the creative and quality goals the firm establishes, the technologies the firm adopts, and the extent to which internal colleagues collaborate and pursue a common objective.

- The capacity to overcome self-doubt and convey confidence to their followers. Such confidence is most effective when grounded in an understanding of risks and impediments, leading to mitigating strategies. Leaders thoughtfully initiate actions to deal with variables such as shifting market conditions, new competitors, quality concerns, organizational culture, and financial performance.

- High performance standards for themselves and others. The most effective leaders do more than simply challenge others to achieve these standards—they actively support, nurture, and develop others so that success is highly probable.

- The flexibility and the ability to acknowledge failure, abandon unsuccessful approaches, and develop new ones. Alone, or with input from others, firm leaders determine when to shift marketing priorities, when to bring in new talent, when to apply new technologies, and when to elevate others into roles where their leadership potential can blossom.

- Decisiveness when addressing nonperforming members of the firm, either through increasing developmental attention or dismissal.

- Credibility arising from success with clients and projects. Time in the trenches, usually with project responsibility, increases the leader's connection with individuals in the firm.

- Willingness to carry the torch in the firm and in the community and, by so doing, to pave the way for others to lead, to manage internally, and to bring in work from past and new clients.

- Self-confidence and a willingness to support the recognition of others in the firm as leaders, or potential leaders. Firm leaders aren't threatened by the prospect that others also may be strong leaders; their self-confidence allows them to foster the growth of others.

- Recognition of the distinctions between "leadership" and "management." Firm leaders don't confuse the authority of the latter with the energy of the former. Firm leaders know that both are necessary and recognize that effective leadership reduces the need for formal management. Except in firms where strong management is a goal itself, effective leaders strive to direct more of the firm's effort toward serving clients and delivering projects—in alignment with their vision and standards for the firm—and less into managing and administering the firm.

Successful firm leaders do not all share the same profile with respect to these characteristics. However, they do make sure that others in the firm have a strong sense of where the firm is going and what each individual can and should be doing to move it in that direction.

Enhancing leadership capability

There are effective leaders who seem to develop many of these characteristics naturally, perhaps because leadership strengths are embedded in their DNA or because circumstances required that they rise to the occasion. No matter their genetic makeup, individuals with the desire to lead typically can develop the

necessary characteristics through discipline and hard work. That being said, what can an aspiring design firm leader do to enhance the likelihood of success?

- Learn about the organization. Investigate why, and how, it does what it does, its culture, its strengths and shortcomings, its financial and business underpinnings, its processes for project delivery, and its reputation in the marketplace.

- Connect to people in many different areas of the firm. Learn who does what, how workgroups are organized, and the contribution that each person and group makes to the firm's overall success.

- Develop an external presence in the community and in the marketplace. Get involved and become visible in civic organizations, professional organizations, client organizations, and general business organizations.

- Maintain and demonstrate high personal and professional ethics.

- Speak out on relevant issues. Initiate dialogue on various operational and strategic topics. It's not always important to have the right answer. It is important to become recognized as someone who cares about the firm, as someone who thinks about topics important to the firm's future, and as someone who has the initiative, and courage, to step forward and tackle challenging issues.

- Above all, recognize that, by definition, leaders have followers. One measure of leadership success is "followship" success, and effective leaders make sure the people they lead are successful in their jobs.

- In an architecture firm, the path to becoming an effective firm leader means striking a reasonable balance among roles and activities that sometimes conflict.

- Stay close enough to the work and the studio culture to maintain credibility with people in the firm, but be enough removed from day-to-day project work to think strategically about important aspects of the practice.

- Radiate passion for creative, technical, and service quality, but temper that passion with concern for the financial success of the firm.

- Engage in activities outside the firm to elevate the firm's position in the marketplace, but be operational enough to know where things stand in terms of technology, work quality, client satisfaction, finance, staffing, professional growth, and culture.

- Care deeply about the organization, those it serves, and those who do the serving, but be concerned about the learning and development needs of those who will rise to higher responsibility.

- Stay focused on specific priorities, but retain the capacity to juggle multiple and simultaneous priorities.

- Develop a reputation for hard work and dedication, but let the joy and passion of practice be evident to others.

About the contributor

Hugh Hochberg has consulted in practically all aspects of professional practice with over 700 design firms in his 44-year tenure in The Coxe Group, after earning a B. Arch degree from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and an MBA from Harvard. He has lectured and taught about practice and leadership at institutions and organizations in the United States, Asia, and Australia.

About AIA Best Practices

AIA Best Practices is a collection of relevant, experience-based knowledge and expert advice on firm management, project delivery, contracts and more, aligned with the *Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice, 15th edition*. See the full AIA Best Practices collection at aia.org/aia-best-practices.

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Chapter 05 – Organizational Development
Section 05 – Leader Effectiveness