AIA Best Practices:
Practice made simple (but not easy)

Contributed by Hugh Hochberg, Assoc. AIA

Summary

If success results from having the right clients and the right talent, certain attributes allow a firm to make the best choices in these two critical areas. These components may not turn around an ailing business, but they can help the firm to assess important aspects of its ownership and direction.

Level 1: Core concepts

Let's start by not confusing simple with easy. Tiger Woods simplifies a golf swing, but that doesn't make it easy, even for Tiger. The concept of the United Nations as a forum for international dialogue is simple, but that doesn't make it easy. E=MC2 is simple to read, but that doesn't make it easy to understand.

At the core of a successful practice—of any professional service discipline—are two critical components: the right clients and the right talent. Absent either of those, success drops dramatically. Absent both, the practice ceases.

Mucking up the core is surprisingly easy to do. Accepting clients for the wrong reasons, such as sustaining volume, viewing a client as a friend, and going after an appealing fee, guarantees suboptimal results. In contrast, the right clients share the firm's values to a large degree. They work with the firm, compensate appropriately for value received, challenge (at times to excruciatingly painful degrees), and accept challenge. Having the right client is more important than the right project, in the sense that the right client will challenge and encourage the architect to excel in a way that is consistent with the architect's own vision.

Mucking up the talent component is also phenomenally easy. You are bound to falter if you hire and retain personnel not for their talent and fit with the firm's values and needs (operational, current, and/or strategic) but for reasons such as availability, friendship, cost, convenience, or superficial diversity.

Level 2: Leadership, culture, and process

The three next most important components of a successful practice are leadership, culture, and process.

- Leadership aligns talent, defines standards, sets tone, attracts clients, and inspires performance.

- Culture covers the attitude, values, collegiality, communications, and peer pressure to perform.

- Process defines how the firm produces its services and products.

Of the three, leadership is the most important because it shapes and catalyzes everything else. In that case, why not include it in the first level? Quite bluntly, empirical observation tells us that there are indeed successful firms in which practitioners' architectural vision and skills overcome an inadequacy of leadership, an example of which is arguably the most famous architect in U.S. history: Frank Lloyd Wright.

Level 3: Management and resources

The third level of importance—still important but not as critical to a successful practice—includes managerial, administrative, and resource components. Specifically these components include operations management, financial management, and technology strategy and application.

The level 3 functions ensure that the right resources (technologies, facilities, supplies, and so on) are in the right place at the right time; that the business aspects receive adequate attention; and that people are positioned in roles where they bring the highest value to the firm through their capabilities.

Questions to ask for success

Once these components are in place, success requires continual, candid assessment and corresponding actions. Do the clients allow and challenge the firm to perform at its best? Do the people in the firm have the capability, intellect, ambition, and ethic to excel—and to recognize that today's excellence might well be tomorrow's mediocrity? Do they contribute to the firm's and their own intellectual capital? Do technologies and other resources enhance performance and help materialize ideas? Does the culture encourage professional collegiality? Do all in the firm recognize the importance of profitability, and do they understand their individual ability to affect it?

How leaders catalyze success

As noted above, strong leadership is not critical to achieve certain levels of success. Without it, however, few practitioners are likely to succeed through the strength of their talent, creativity, and vision alone. For almost all, leadership—or a blend of leadership and effective management—is indeed warranted.

While the right talent and the right clients form the core of a successful practice, leadership catalyzes both. Leaders make the frequently emotionally straining decisions to change talent and clients. Leaders steadily raise the bar regarding standards. They continuously emphasize innovation. They take the risks of new directions, new processes, new technologies, new talent, and new clients. They encourage willingness for investment in the firm.

And, at their best, leaders look critically in the mirror to assess their own performance and contribution. They ask whether they enhance or impede others. They challenge themselves. They see the leadership mantle not as an end in itself but as an obligation to shepherd the firm, inspire individuals, and define a vision that embraces others, both in the firm and outside.

About the contributor

This article was originally published in the spring 2006 issue of Oregon Architect, the newsletter of AIA Oregon. It was adapted with permission. Hugh Hochberg, Assoc. AIA, is a partner in the Coxe Group, a Seattle-based multidisciplinary management consulting firm that specializes in services for the design professions. In 30 years of consulting, Hochberg has worked with more than 600 firms, many of which were startup practices.

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