AIA Best Practices:
Seven attributes of design-first firms

Contributed by the AIA Knowledge Resources staff

Summary

Jack MacAllister, FAIA, and Mark Cameron, Hon. AIA, of the Cameron MacAllister Group, presented "Winning the Talent War: Seven Ingredients for Building a Design-First Culture and Practice" at the 2008 AIA National Convention and Expo. The Cameron MacAllister Group is a California-based consulting firm for the design and construction industry.

How to build a design-first culture

The Cameron MacAllister Group has consulted with more than 50 architecture and design firms, including many AIA Firm Award recipients. Through their work they have identified the following seven attributes of design-first firms:

- Foster an entrepreneurial culture.

- Develop strategic plans.

- Plan leadership succession.

- Motivate talent.

- Use an integrated design process.

- Promote sustainable design.

- Encourage a learning environment.

Entrepreneurial culture

Design-first firms create an entrepreneurial culture that supports risk-taking and respects discord. In a survey of architects who recently changed jobs, the most important factor in job satisfaction for senior managers was the level of challenge offered. Respondents also noted that the firm's vision and culture, the quality of the firms' work, location, and project type were all extremely important.

Strategic plans

The development of a strategic plan helps firm leaders build vision and direction. Once it is written, articulate the vision and goals to professional staff so everyone is working toward the same goal. A strategic plan should include a clear, realistic goal—for instance, receiving the AIA Firm Award—and the steps required to meet the goal.

The strategic plan should answer questions such as:

- What are the firm's strategies for recruitment?

- How is the firm going to reward employees for good design work?

- What is the firm's budget for these strategies?

The strategic plan should include ways to monitor progress and adjust for changes. Leadership should review and update the vision, goals, and objectives as needed. Take the time to review the strategic plan annually, and address areas that require attention, while celebrating accomplishments.

Leadership succession

Firms survive through leadership transitions, not ownership transitions. Identify people with potential, train them to lead, and work on a transition for 10 years or longer. Use an ownership transfer mechanism that is affordable for both sides; this can be accomplished by transferring a portion of ownership each year through bonuses.

Motivate talent

Encourage the hiring of staff from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Instead of hiring based on qualifications, hire people for their intellectual status. To do this, during the interview tell potential employees about your firm, its goals, vision—and then ask: How can you help us get there?

It is important to understand not only how to hire design-focused staff but how to keep them motivated. Similar to the responses noted in the section titled "Entrepreneurial Culture," designers want support from firm leadership and opportunities to:

- work on challenging projects

- work with great clients

- work with a great team

Integrated design process

Design-first firms use an integrated design process. The first step in an integrated design process is to set goals and metrics for a project. Discuss project goals with the design, consulting, and engineering team and staff members so everyone is on the same page. Create an open forum for design discussion, and have rigorous design reviews and critiques with all parties involved. The most noteworthy design-first firms go one

step further and invest in education and research and development. They also champion unconventional wisdom.

Sustainable design

Sustainable design is a critical element. MacAllister cited, "Architects will become irrelevant if they don't start contributing to the earth." Cameron and MacAllister recommend having a firm-wide sustainability leader—a go-to green person for the firm. To give your sustainability program direction, commit to The 2030 Challenge.

Learning environment

Celebrate out-of-the-box thinking. Emphasize and encourage staff members to learn about and explore new materials and methods.

The office culture should highlight interaction, support, and recognition. The firm can enhance success by learning from failures. Include emerging professionals in discussions so they can learn from mistakes as well.

Incorporate learning situations often through a formalized intern development and emerging professionals program.

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Chapter 05 – Organizational Development
Section 02 – Entrepreneurial Practice: Starting an Architecture Firm