

# Establishing your design firm as a values-based organization

## Practice Matters

By Paul Jorgensen, AIA

At its best, design can be a wonderful, joint experience in which people with many different skills work together to overcome each project's special challenges; various ideas are developed, and things get built. The experience should be very satisfying. But, often it isn't. Why? Because some firms capable of designing good buildings can be difficult places to work. Good and bad organizations come in all shapes and sizes, although it has been my observation that the larger the firm, the greater the risk that those running it will become preoccupied with its form. They often put more structure, rules, and procedures in place to govern those who are actually in the trenches doing the work, while losing track of the values and mission that originally motivated its formation. The resulting bureaucracy that emerges may make managers less concerned with solving their client's problems, further weakening the firm's effectiveness.

Unfortunately, architects have little training in the dynamics of organizations and how to create, manage or survive in them. Once on the job, we either learn to adapt to the internal logic of a particular workplace or end up leaving.

### Values-based organizations

Does this mean that organizational problems cannot be overcome? No. The real problem is that often the

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way firms are organized does not emphasize a core philosophy or system of values. Organizational structure in itself is not a very good motivator for human beings.

Firms are a lot like people: Before you can be effective in life you must know who you are: what you believe in; what motivates you, and what you will do for money and what you will not. Firms are the same. A firm defines what it is by being concerned about some things, and not about others. It needs a reason for being—something great must motivate it to succeed. Mere survival is not a reason for being, nor is making money.

For example, a group that decides it wants to design leading-edge biotech research facilities has a reason for being. Being the best provides motivation. Two people striking out on their own in an effort to succeed do not necessarily have a concept that will make them successful. But if their ambition is to find innovative technical solutions while exploring new design directions for public sector clients, they will have a more directed vision and better chance for success.

People have dreams and emotions; organizational structures do not. Strongly-held beliefs—values—are the foundation of an effective organization. Firm leaders and employees who have ideas and aspirations in common can generate tremendous energy. For people starting out on their careers or seeking a new job, the best strategy is to try to find an employer whose beliefs and values are similar to their own.

### Organizational styles

Since architects create structures, they seem to gravitate toward structure-like business models. Some firms are organized like tripods, held aloft by design, management, and marketing. Another structure is matrix-like: principals oversee project managers who, in turn, oversee the different departments supplying staff to the project. Other firms are organized into "pods"—studios that



market and produce their own work. Sometimes each studio is associated with a particular building type. Other firms use a market segment approach as an overlay to a firm-matrix organization.

Finally, there are firms built around the strong values, ambitions and capabilities of a single person. A firm like this can be very clear about what it stands for because the principal's values are felt all through the workplace.

### When firms lose their way

Growth and change make many firms forget their original mission and values. For example, many design firms have experienced tremendous growth over the last few years. When their workloads increased, they added staff to one office, or additional offices were opened or acquired. When a firm is kept alive and growing over a long period of time, it is almost inevitable

that the original reasons and passions upon which the firm is based are transformed gradually through its history. New people bring new ideas, for better or worse, so it is ironic but true that a firm without an eye to transformation and change can lose its original vitality through success and longevity.

When change occurs and old methods of organizing and accomplishing work break down, it is natural to attack these problems. But, this is also the time when the philoso-

phy and values underpinning the firm are at their most vulnerable if they are not considered. Working in both large and small firms, I have observed that the larger the company, the more a firm's structure and organization will be tinkered with. Meddling with organization charts, rules, and procedures does not usually enhance a firm's vitality. Usually, these tinkering have the most effect on the very same upper-level managers who are mak-

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ing the changes; that is, those whose careers have revolved around creating rules and changing organizational matrices rather than interacting with clients and working on projects.

Any firm that becomes sidetracked from its values base can be full of conflict and tension. Managers compound things by improvising solutions to long-term problems. Internal rules and policies are covered over by a veneer of political correctness publicly, but regarded privately with cynicism. New hires in such firms immediately learn that things get done in two ways: the way the organizational chart says they get done and the

fit in with the firm's approach to practice—strong values will attract like minds. Expressing these things, in value and action statements, is useful because these become the measure of how things are done.

### Value and action statements

Each value statement is part of a building block that expresses part of the firm's overall philosophy. What they all have in common is that they describe beliefs, behaviors, and that they engage and empower people at all levels in the firm, not just the managers. They should also foster open communications.

When creating values statements, it is also important to keep

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way they really get done. These contradictions create confusion that can put employees and employers in conflict, something that few of the best talent and brightest people want to be part of for very long.

### A values-based system

Conflict can be minimized if the leaders of a firm are aware of the pitfalls of unchecked growth, particularly when it begins to cloud the core ideas that were behind the founding of the firm. Some firms have found it helpful to hold retreats specifically designed to reevaluate the firm's purpose, expanding these ideas and devising means of expressing them to the rest of the organization, not just in words but in actions too.

The firm's leaders must live the core ideals they set forth and show their commitment to them. If leaders expect one thing of employees and do something else, their efforts at establishing and maintaining a philosophical basis for the existence of the firm will be in vain. When the leaders of a firm articulate what they believe in, they can also better test whether prospective employees

in mind that most people need and want something more from their job than a paycheck. People want to believe in what they do, to believe in what their company stands for and the work it produces. They want to do a good job and help their company be successful. They want to be encouraged, recognized, and treated fairly, in an environment where they are not threatened, but encouraged.

Examples of values statements that might apply to firms of all shapes and sizes could include many things, such as the following:

- We care about our clients and each other. We want to be proud of the work we do.
- We will look for the right answer, not just the first answer. We will look for innovative solutions in design and the use of technology.
- Everyone contributes to our success, and shares in its rewards. We will help each other.
- I will help do what needs to be done. We will work hard, yet still have fun.
- No dogs are allowed in the office, that is, no clients, no jobs, and no coworkers. No children are allowed—we're all adults, and we will act like it.

- If an action is unacceptable ethically, we won't take it. The truth matters.
- If something troubles you, speak up for the good of everyone. If you don't know what to do, talk to someone. If you don't understand, ask questions.
- We are responsible for the quality of the buildings we produce.
- If a design or detail is substandard and needs to be fixed, make an issue of it, but also be prepared to help fix it.
- We are in business to make money, and money is good, but it will not make us compromise our standards.
- More work is good—we need to market even though everyone is busy.
- We will share information about the projects and the firm with each other but not with outsiders.
- Change will never go away and we will always continue to examine and embrace it.

### Your firm's values statements

Your own firm's list of values statements will differ from this one, depending upon who you are, and what kind of firm you are building. I have been successful in using such lists as mottoes for firms I have managed, to help vocalize and clarify values statements and build firm culture.

The most important thing that values statements can do is to empower workers. This gives them a sense of individual responsibility for their actions, while emphasizing that they have a responsibility to the firm and the client. Sharing responsibility is the key to encouraging people to act individually, as well as being fertile ground for developing a firm's future leaders. When successful, employees will act on these principles even when the firm's leaders are not present.

Values statements that encourage open communication also help with conflict resolution. When conflicts do arise, as they will, discussions with an employee can center on individual responsibility, not just on whether the firm's procedures

have been acted upon to the letter.

The great benefit of an open system like this is that there is constant feedback about what is working and what is not, and this allows course corrections to be made more easily. When your managers and employees can discuss problems openly, you can find potential solutions that fit your specific organization. Of course, this also requires leaders to be leaders, not dictators or aristocrats.

The ideas expressed here are not meant to diminish the fact that even values-based organizations need structure; however, this can be an overlay which defines how certain functions and responsibilities are assigned. As the organization changes, the responsibilities of different employees can be re-evaluated.

Responsibilities don't always have to be distributed purely on the basis of rank. Instead they can be parceled out according to each individual's area of expertise. The focus of the practice can then remain on its mission and its work for clients, rather than on making its employees conform to rules. Remember, a value-based organization cannot be expected to flourish in a highly-structured setting dominated by rules and procedures.

### The acid test

When I first became a manager, I reflected on why I loved working at some firms and others were torture, as well as and why people were energized in some firms and cynical and demotivated in others. The difference seemed to be that some organizations emphasized structure and rules of bureaucracy while others seemed to motivate people with a sense of purpose—it is as simple as the difference between control and leadership. My personal observation is that when things are working well in a firm, its mission and direction will be clear. The only way you can test them for yourself is to question yourself, your employees, and look at the resulting work all of you produce. ■