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Nurturing Staff to Enrich a Healthy Firm

by Richard N. Pollack, FAIA, FIIDA

Sound financial and business development strategies and tactics are necessary to help a firm run more efficiently, effectively, and profitably. But the other critical factor driving the success of a firm is its people and their needs. Helping your employees be the best that they can be is critical.

Most designers and architects complete a rigorous educational process and enter the workforce with the fervor of design in their hearts and minds. So how is that energy and excitement maintained in the workplace? In fact, the first roles and tasks given in a firm are often not what a recent graduate anticipates, and all the zeal of sketching fabulous design options is moderated by learning how to detail and draft. That is one part of our growth as designers. But beyond the need to understand how to produce construction documents and work with contractors, it is important to keep learning and growing as a professional. And today's design firm has a responsibility to provide staff with tools to grow. Those educational possibilities should be based on components that will increase employees' professional capabilities and will also be valuable to the organization.

Educational opportunities in the office include the typical lunch-and-learn presentations often given by vendors, but firm leaders should think outside the box. Consider inviting a millworking firm to come in and show how design drawings are converted into shop drawings. They could present samples of how millwork is constructed—which may not mirror the design drawings—and integrated into the rest of the construction.

In another example, a studio focused on hospitality might organize field trips to local hotels and restaurants to tour the back-of-house area, with the client pointing out the elements that make the facility function well and how it can be improved. Often, younger staff does not get to visit a project during construction, or even when completed, and it is extremely beneficial to learn how the detail they had created and drawn fits into the larger construct and whether it was successful or not.

Principals should rightly be concerned about not losing too many billable hours to staff education, but the bottom line is that more educated and committed staff will bring significant returns in effectiveness and efficiency. One of my current clients took their entire 18-person office from San Francisco to Los Angeles for the

day to visit the Getty Center. The trip was expensive, but offered an amazing return on investment by energizing staff. An additional payoff: The firm received calls from designers in other firms looking for a job after they heard about the event.

Professional development opportunities are not restricted to group activities during work hours. Encourage staff to join professional associations such as IIDA, ASID, and AIA to take advantage of their continuing education programs. The firm's conditions for funding those memberships should obligate staff to be active in the associations by serving on a committee and potentially the board. The employee should then inform colleagues about the organization through an internal lunch-and-learn or a write-up, or both. The detailed criteria for reimbursement should be codified in the staff manual. Another possible employee incentive is the reimbursement—both in dollars and time—for taking and passing licensing and certification exams for NCIDQ, ARE, and LEED.

Another major component of staff development is mentoring—an activity that's often talked about but few organizations actually implement in a formal process. My former design firm had created a mentoring program that specifically identified an associate, senior associate, or principal as a mentor for each staff person. The mentor was outside of the employee's performance evaluation track, and was not intended to be someone working daily with the mentee. The mentoring program was not intended to add another input channel regarding how to design or document projects. Instead, it focused on allowing the staff person to more broadly realize their potential and develop skills such as verbal and written communication.

The goal of these programs is to develop a nurturing and learning culture, to create a more knowledgeable staff that is committed to a long-term relationship with the organization, and to help the firm grow.

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