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Firm Culture as the Baseline Differentiator

Values and Value



BY NANCY EGAN, FSMPS

A few weeks ago as I was writing this, I was notified of the death of Charles “Tiny” Lawrence, a former partner at CRS, the firm where I truly began my career in this profession. What was unusual about the email and the link to the obituary was not the message itself, but the fact that I received five versions of it from five different former colleagues throughout the morning. Had I been particularly close to the deceased or had continued to have any relationship with him in the more than 25 years since I left the firm, I wouldn’t have been surprised. While I highly respected Tiny, I didn’t really know him.

Reflecting on this unexpected outreach, I came to the conclusion my old friends were actually mourning the disappearance of a firm culture that had a profound influence on several generations of architects who at one time worked at Caudill Rowlett Scott—including us. It was hardly a perfect environment, evidenced by the numbers of *former* employees it produced long before it morphed into the publicly traded CRSS. It was, however, an incredibly powerful culture replete with all the characteristics that I have been longing for and studying ever since I quit, going across the street for more money.

So what was it that has made us nostalgic for a place that pretty much overworked and underpaid its staff? First, and perhaps most importantly, we knew what mattered. Team, innovation, design, process. The values were articulated in a dozen different ways. The people you worked for and with could tell you. Books by and about the firm made it clear. Bill Caudill's folksy, yet pointed, TIBs—"This I Believe"—were posted at the coffee stations almost weekly.

There was a special genius in the rituals and artifacts created or adopted. Some of them were visually smart, like the aluminum Halliburton suitcases that carried team supplies to off-site "squatters" sessions or the handy pocket cards with the distinctive burning bush logo. Others like the weekly pin-up sessions in the wide hallway which anyone in the firm could attend or CRS "school" taught by the principals on topics they seemed to own and probably did—from Willie Pena explaining programming to Tiny Lawrence talking about design while holding a perfectly carved wooden spoon—reinforced "how things were done around there." There were stories about the early days, about great wins or losses, about people who stayed and those who left; everyone could tell them.

In retrospect, we were as much a tribe as a firm. The longer I have worked in and with design firms, the more I understand how these aspects of firm culture influence not only the working experience but the work itself. Culture is the baseline differentiator. It is not that there are good or bad firm cultures. Some are more effective than others in achieving desired results in different environments. Clearly, the ongoing recession has tested them all.

Culture is the lived manifestation of the values of the firm, and the key components of practice—strategy, talent, relationships, and content—are all informed by culture.

That means that many, if not most, of the daily decisions that shape life in a firm derive from the cultural foundation, the DNA of the practice. In truth, some of it is lineage. Look at the firms that are the descendents of Kahn, SOM, Charles Moore, or CRS—values carrying forward.

Yet, every firm is as individual as fingerprints. As much as the Web sites and proposals often say the same thing—"We listen, we care, we deliver on time and on budget"—clients as well as employees know they are not the same. Firm leaders make

decisions differently, they reward different things, they hire different people, they choose to work with different clients (and I do mean choose, even in hard times).

My absolute favorite question to ask when I am working with firms: What matters most around here? Followed by: Give me an example. This is culture in action. Everybody knows what matters, because regardless of what senior management or the marketing materials say, what matters is what gets rewarded. I am not necessarily talking about financial rewards. Reward systems in design firms are other. Who gets assigned to the best project? Who makes associate? Principal? Who is part of decision-making? Who get invited to the client dinner? Who shows the visiting dignitaries around?

Some firms value loyalty and long-term commitment, others bet on young talent and velocity. Not right or wrong, but different with different clients and different end goals. Firms all across the spectrum produce interesting and valuable projects for their clients, but how? It's a choice, articulated or not, about values. For some firms, casino design is just an extension of their work in hospitality; for others it's the strip-mining of the culture. For some firms, research and evidence-based design are critical to their concept of practice; for others the issues of community and corporate citizenship define the way they work.

"One of the most important things that firms can do right now is a cultural assessment."

As many firms cautiously move forward after two daunting years, one of the most important things that they can do right now is a cultural assessment. Is the firm culture strong, it is supportive of the difficult decisions that have been made and those still on the agenda? What needs celebration and what needs transformation?

For the sake of the future, it's maybe time to look up from the balance sheet and take a hard look at "how things are done around here." ■

About the Author



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