

## NeoCon® World's Trade Fair 2010

Michael Hickok, AIA & Yolanda Cole, AIA, IIDA, LEED AP  
Hickok Cole Architects, Washington, DC  
June 14, 2010, 11:00 AM



**Title:** *Spiral up to Great Design: Transform your firm through a collaborative design process*

### **Course Description:**

*Spiral up to Great Design!* Transform your firm to achieve great design through a collaborative process. Learn how to develop a strategic plan to achieve your design goals, create a culture of design to encourage innovation, and market your successes to *spiral up* and generate more great design opportunities.

### **Learning Objectives:**

**Plan it!** Develop and implement a design-focused strategic plan

**Do it!** Train, motivate, energize and leverage design talent in your office

**Tell it!** Generate “the buzz” to create new design opportunities

**Win it!** Create a marketing strategy to win new work

### **Introduction to Hickok Cole Architects**

Hickok Cole Architects is a 65-person, award-winning regional firm specializing in commercial office buildings and interiors, multi-family housing and mixed-use projects. Our firm is a product of a merger of two companies in 2003, each of which has been a fixture in the region for over 20 years. The bulk of this presentation covers the goals, processes and actions we developed in to transform the firm in our first five year strategic plan.

#### **In the Beginning**

As we formed our newly merged firm, we made a conscious decision to shift the focus of the company from a project management-based firm to a design-based firm, while maintaining the balance represented by our motto: *Great Design, Great Management, Great Place to Work*. We asked ourselves the critical question: “What are we willing to do to get there?”

### **The Great Design Summit**

It takes a partnership...and it takes a village to get there. You have to have agreement of purpose at the top, and buy-in on a plan of action from below. But before you can build a new future, you have to take stock of who you are now, where you want to be in the future and how you are going to get there.

#### **Look in the Mirror**

As we began a process of self evaluation we recognized certain real strengths, however the quality of design was inconsistent and there were projects that came in and out of the office with little design oversight or quality control.

What have we accomplished? What are our best projects?

What's working? What's not? What are our strengths? Weaknesses?

What can we do to improve design oversight?

What can we do to improve design presentations (delivery and content)?



## Look to the Future

We not only needed to take stock of where we were, but create a new vision of where we wanted to be in the next five years.

How do we want to be seen within the design community?

Who are our future competitors? Clients?

Who do we need to help us to get there?

How do we nurture and leverage the talent we have?

## Firm Culture

We take great pride in the collaborative and caring culture of the firm and the collegiality and loyalty it breeds. In the area of design, our collaborative style and the need for clear leadership in the design of projects were in conflict at times, thereby hindering us from producing the *best design*. Talent was uneven across the firm; some talent was untested or undiscovered.

What can we do to create a “culture of design” that permeates the firm?

How do we allow for design collaboration and yet maintain strong design leadership?

Who are the strong designers? Who are up and coming? Who are we unsure about?

How do we nurture existing talent? Discover hidden talent? Find new talent?

## Express Yourself

We were concerned that so much change could damage the culture we had built, so we asked ourselves – what are our most treasured attributes? Among these were:

We are a strength-based firm

We are transparent in our goals, finances and processes

We are collaborative and inclusive

We are fun!

## Say it out Loud

We have sayings around the office that reflect some of these attributes. Among these are:

*We treat you like adults, so we expect you to act like adults*

*Good ideas can come from anywhere*

*No divas and no prima donnas*

*There are design opportunities in every project*

*Every project will find its own style*

*Design communicates, whether you like it or not*

## Do what you Say

It's not enough to invent mottos and promote catchy phrases. You also have to walk the walk and do what you say. This is how you build trust with your employees and provide leadership for your firm.

## Firm and Team Structure

The structure of the firm was re-organized to create a market sector firm structure and one that would accommodate HCA internal processes (The Matrix). Early on, the market sector organization had not yet taken hold. The process organization was fairly well-developed, but the interaction between market sectors and the firm's processes was unclear, especially in the area of design. We formed a Design Committee to nurture design processes in the office, yet its role was undefined.

How can we clarify the relationship between these two parts of the Matrix?

Where should design leadership, authority and oversight reside?

What is the role of the Design Committee? How can it be more effective?



Are project teams structured in the right way? If not, how else might we go about it?

### **Build a New Structure**

Our project management-based firm designed projects through the leadership of the project manager. Design was usually led by that manager. In our new vision, design leadership needed to be separated, thus we created the title of Project Designer. Sometimes this person was more experienced than the project manager, and sometimes less. This required a clear distinction of the roles of each on any given project team.

### **Plan it!**

It starts with a *Strategic Plan* that incorporates design goals, objectives, action items, assignments and a schedule for implementation. For Example:

#### **Formulate Goals**

**Goal 1:** Improve design quality and processes in the office

Objective 1: Develop new design processes to encourage high-level design thought

Strategies:

- Create a Design Committee to provide a framework for a design culture
- Conduct regular charrettes, peer reviews, pin-ups and desk crits
- Restructure project teams to include a “Project Designer”
- Create a design culture in your office, surround yourself with design ideas
- Re-think how you do design within your project teams

Analyze how design gets done and look at ways to improve your methods and processes. Bring in some new blood; stir the design pot.

**Goal 2:** Raise the design profile of Hickok Cole in the marketplace

Objective 1: Win high-quality, high-profile projects

Strategies:

- Form/renew relationships with top developers and brokers in the region
- Team with National design firms on large regional projects
- Enter and win strategic design competitions

Tell your clients that you are raising the bar, find others whom you can team with to increase your depth or move you to a new scale or market area. Plan and go after a design competition in a big way.

**Goal 3:** Increase public awareness of high-profile projects

Objective 1: Identify and enter projects for a wide array of awards

Strategies:

- Review previous award winners for form and content
- Develop relationships and pitch projects for publication
- Hire photographers with award-winning track record

Blow your own horn! Spend some money showing off, learn how to win awards and pitch a story to get published.

### **Do it!**

We started with re-structuring our **Project Teams** by adding the title of “Project Designer” on projects of a scale where management and design can be separated. We created a chart of roles and responsibilities and implemented it on the next project. All team members were charged with a role in creating great design.



One of the earliest steps was to create a **Design Committee**. The design committee does not do design; it is there to create and nurture a design environment in the office.

### **Work it Out**

Design Committee Goals:

- To establish support systems that encourages innovative thinking
- To develop processes and tools that assures design excellence
- To identify and provide design opportunities for staff
- To establish skill development systems that fosters design talent in the office

### **Collaborate**

- Charrettes
- Peer Reviews
- Desk Critiques

### **Energize**

- Design Exercises
- In-house Design Competitions
- Pro-bono Competitions

### **Invest**

- Model Shop
- Software Training Lab

This was not easy! It took a long time for people to become comfortable with the process and to trust that people were there to help improve the design.

### **Tell it!**

Once you have a portfolio you are proud of, get it out there. Submit projects for awards, find an angle or a story to pitch or write about, get it published.

### **Win Awards**

- Document the design process with photos and presentation materials
- Coordinate efforts with the marketing department
- Match up potential projects with specific awards
- Look at previous winners, sit on juries to figure out how it works

### **Publish it**

- Pitch ideas to the press and to magazines
- Form relationships with writers with key publications
- Write articles on hot topics
- Identify key publications, negotiate terms for advertisements

### **Spread the Word**

- Work with your clients – they want publicity too!
- Send out press releases
- Create marketing pieces that catch peoples' attention



### Win it!

We started out by telling our clients that we were raising the bar. We did this through a client survey and by speaking the words when we met with our clients. We told them how we were going about it and then showed them our progress.

#### **Find the Opportunity**

We also learned to focus our design where it mattered most. The key is to identify where to direct your energy and your budget to get the best “bang for the buck.” People love to hear that you designed something that looks great that came in on (*or under*) budget.

#### **Take a Risk**

On the other end of the spectrum, sometimes you have to take a risk and go for it! This can be costly, but it can also be very rewarding. Identify a key competition and give it everything you've got. Once you have won some big ones, you will find yourself “on the list.”

#### **Check the Stats**

Keep track of your record and be sure to communicate it to your staff and your clients. You will be surprised at how much you have accomplished.

### Results!

It took us five years to work through our strategic plan for design, and when we look back, we can now be very proud of the results:

We won 3 major build-to-suits, two through competition with national firms

We tripled our design awards and doubled the number of articles about the firm

We have been featured in several national publications:

Interior Design, Architectural Record, Architect, Multi-Housing News

We regularly receive RFPs from new clients; we are on all the “lists”

We produce better graphics and build more models

We attract great clients and the great projects...and

*The collaborative design process is now entrenched in our culture*

But you can't rest on your laurels, so just about the time you become comfortable with where you are, its' time to...

### Start all over again!

