



WHAT ARCHITECTS SEE WAY TOO OFTEN

By: Jeffrey W. Ganthner, AIA

This scene occurs all too often across organizations. It has been deemed that a new building, a new campus, a major renovation is needed to bring new life to old, to grow, to expand, or to serve more customers/clients. An architect is commissioned to design a new building and immediately gets started based on these common and overly simplistic set of instructions: “We want to expand our organization by 25% over the next 2 years – we need a new building to accommodate this growth.” Ideas are shared – plans are started and then confusion begins. The completion of plans is delayed as it is sadly discovered that growth by 25% means something to one part of the organization and something completely different to another part of the organization. Confusion leads to frustration as everyone begins to share their own independent ideas around a conference table with a set of building plans as the focus – which is completely the wrong focus.

It is easy to focus on the building plans after all they are often interesting and creative. It is something a leadership team can comment on and it provides an easy distraction to what may be a more challenging task. It fits nicely into a review slot at a board meeting. It allows focus on the tangible physical attributes of a building as opposed to tackling the harder issues of where we see our organization, today, next year, five years from now and so on. It avoids dealing with

a failing department or process. It avoids having to implement organizational change. It is the safe play.

Architects often find themselves caught in the middle of competing organizational interests as they develop concept designs, move into schematic design and eventually develop the construction documents. Often wishing they could challenge their clients to first think strategically about their organizations – to undergo an organizational development process - prior to launching a building program. This is analogous to putting a coat of paint on a piece of rotting porch trim – looks like you solved the problem in the short term, but instead you only delayed the eventual failure.

Strategic thinking about who the organization is and where it is going is a critical first step prior to the design of any building. Commissioning an architect to design a set of plans is a very expensive way to discover that your organization lacks a clear direction about its future – as plan revision after plan revision leads to more change order costs.

In her book, *Strategic Thinking and the New Science*, Irene Sanders discusses Edward Lorenz's research in making weather forecasts and how small differences or changes can have a much larger impact than at first realized. For example, a new leader joins a company and begins to implement change that may seem small on the surface. At first, no one thinks of the implications until little by little the organization begins to improve both internally and with clients. One leader changes a team and the entire organization changes.

Or how about an adjacent property owner decides that it is time for him to sell his land and he approaches an adjacent neighboring business with the opportunity to purchase the property at a significant discount. Most businesses do not perform land deals every day so it falls to the role of the Operations manager that last expanded the business square footage 10 years ago. Since it is a "deal," the business decides to purchase the land while paying little attention, at first, to what it will mean to the organization other than knowing that it will allow for future physical growth. Unfortunately, the land purchase stretches the very finite resources of the business further than they initially thought and now they face the need to either sell the land or make

other cuts within the organization. Not to mention the fact that the land purchase was a big distraction and other organizational issues have now developed due to lack of attention.

In both of these examples, the impact of hiring a new leader (a fortunate success) and a land purchase (a fiscal failure) were not considered a possible risk to the health of an organization. However, if the discipline of strategic thinking was implemented prior to making decisions – both small and big – the organization would set itself up to have more planned and predictable success.

Sanders goes further to discuss the impact of initial conditions on organizations. Businesses have the unfortunate dilemma of having a long memory of how things have always been done. They resist change within the organization. The Manager/Employee organizational model is expected and understood to be the only way to organize a business. What if the business was organized in the manner best to serve its clients and thus create a dynamic client serving model to resemble its new organizational model. What if instead of having personnel organized around a manager in a department they were organized around clients in a particular market?

Implementing the discipline of strategic thinking into a business would make it very easy for an architect then to design for 25% growth because the growth is already defined. It would make it easy to see the type of dynamic changes that were needed to go along with the physical growth. It would show why the land deal being offered is not the right move for the organization at that time. And, most importantly, implementing strategic thinking as an intentional process would keep the business focused on its organizational health and in making the changes needed to remain vibrant and client focused.

Businesses pay a lot of attention to developing and communicating their mission statement. However, very little work - and that is because it is very hard work - goes into long term strategic thinking. After all, a business may say that we know our clients and our people already – why do we need to strategically plan. Or we get trapped in allowing the past determine the future. “We grow 3% a year because that is what we have done every year for the last ten years.” Business growth is not a straight line year in and year out. Opportunities do present themselves. As

Sanders, further discusses, a straight line is not a reality. Reality is that a leader does drop in looking for a job or that a property owner presents their land for sale. Strategic thinking helps ensure that you can better handle both the planned and unplanned impacts of reality on your organization.

Strategic thinking that is intelligent enough to plan for the present and future and flexible enough to accommodate change should be the goal. Can your business communicate to an architect and answer their exposing questions on what it means to grow your organization? Does your organization invest in strategic thinking first?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeffrey W. Ganthner, AIA is a proven and well diversified professional expertise leading teams and organizations in the architecture, engineering, construction and technology industries. Jeffrey casts the vision for innovative thought, leadership, and solutions. He has led a distinguished and diverse career as an architect, engineer, designer, teacher entrepreneur, and business leader. He can be reached at jeff@leadershiphunt.com.