

Consensus building leads to excellence



Many of us, depending on our generation, share the experience of designing and building with Tinker Toys, Lincoln Logs or Legos. Most put away their design dreams in childhood but a few adventurous souls go on to become architects and actually design and build spaces

for the rest of us to use and enjoy.

When they become architects most dream of making the impact of a Frank Lloyd Wright but soon come to terms with designing less glamorous functional yet important buildings in their community.

As in any profession, architects who stand out are unique.

Swaim Associates Ltd, winner of the 2006 Arizona Firm of the Year Award from the American Institute of Architects (AIA), demonstrates an approach to excellence that can help any business be more successful.

This award honors firms that have produced distinguished architecture over a period of ten years, and have made significant contributions to the profession, their community, and the AIA, and have transcended their local boundaries in making these contributions. This is the first time a firm outside Phoenix has been given the award.

We asked Phil Swaim, president and son of the founder of the firm that has been in business for 37 years how he and his partners were able to achieve excellence.

“Swaim Associates focuses on consensus and cooperation between partners, between staff and between the company and their clients,” said Swaim. Out of these creative, cooperative processes comes break-through innovation.

“One key to our success is that we have great partners and we are all working partners. Principals don’t have heavy involvement in projects but we do provide continuity. Ed Marley, vice president, handles financial management. Phil Swaim is the outside marketing guy. Mark Bollard, vice president, is in charge of operations. We also have two associates who have been on board five years and are critical to the firm’s success,” said Swaim. “The secret of the partnership is that we have a lot of respect for one another. We are very different people but we work in an open team environment. What that means is, although we all own various amounts of stock, we run the company as if we were equal partners. No one person is in charge of design. We

use a consensus process to design projects as well as run the business.”

The partners say they have never had a serious disagreement. They don’t socialize outside the office.

“We don’t avoid each other but we have different lives,” said Swaim.

The firm had a chance to test their consensus process when they designed their own new building. Without an outside client to consider, the partners had to collaborate and make group decisions. Swaim acknowledges it is more difficult and time consuming than having one person call the shots but he maintains the process is what leads to innovation and excellence.

Some of the firm’s projects as well as their selection as Firm of the Year prove that assumption correct.

Their school design projects have received national attention because of their innovation. They brought powerful partnerships together to design wireless, no textbook environments at Empire High School in the Vail Unified School District. Innovative partnerships with entities including Pima Community College deliver buildings that serve the high schools well and yet also serve the multi-functional community needs.

Another example of excellence is the University of Arizona Highland Commons healthcare innovation in wellness. This program has received national recognition. The facility, 1224 E. Lowell St., is an innovative wellness center encompassing space for a myriad of preventive medical care.

Some of the Best Practices that create excellence at Swaim Associates that can be used in any business are:

1. Use open communication processes
2. Build consensus and have fun with clients
3. Treat everyone with respect

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