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THE WALLS SPEAK

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Quick Summary: The use of walls or open spaces and other environmental factors can have significant impacts.

Abstract:

There is no question that virtually every aspect of business is changing. Although the statement that “change is constant” dates back to a Greek philosopher circa 500BC, changes in technology, the global economy, and probably most significantly, the change in generational attitudes between workers require careful consideration by companies of all sizes. What can be easily missed is the impacts of the physical walls of the company’s facilities. What was effective in the past, may be totally ineffective today.

The article in this collection, “Org Chart Messages,” discusses how the form and format of a company organization chart can send subtle, negative messages to employees that were never intended. The actual employee office seating arrangement can have the same impact but is even more obvious because all employees work in that environment daily. Except for employees first entering the work force, all other employees bring their preconceived ideas about how a work environment should look and function. Every first-time employee will have preconceived ideas based on movies they have seen or visits to their parents’ workplaces.

Complicating the entire office layout problem is the employees’ changing expectation and the tools available to them. Even more profound is the generational difference in expectations. As one example, consider Millennials with their use and reliance on smartphones, tablets, and laptops. They are comfortable using these devices at home, in the car, at the office, or even when walking! They can work with them in small office cubes or perhaps sitting on an overstuffed chair or on the floor next to a window. With their pets at their sides, they may prefer a collaborative environment with a group of co-workers occupying the same space. A more seasoned worker (the polite way of referring to an older person) could not possibly be effective in these “abnormal” settings.

Even office furniture is changing. The standard height of an office desk (28 to 30 inches), is deemed inappropriate for some individuals. Lower desktops, to accommodate keyboards and mice, and even desktops with fully adjustable surface heights that the user can change to accommodate positions that vary from sitting to standing as they so choose are becoming commonplace. Wall-mounted dual or triple LCD display panels may be stationary or move at a variable desk height.

Aside from the significant variations mentioned above, a few fundamental principles listed below should be considered to avoid sending inappropriate messages.

Offices in the Middle

In the not-too-distant past, status was easily shown by having an office with multiple outdoor windows. Super status involved having a corner office! Those not so fortunate were stuck with interior walls. Employees were housed in internal cubes, only able to see daylight if their bosses, with windows, inadvertently left their doors open! If offices are necessary (big “if”), place them on the inside, leaving the outside wall perimeters of the workspace open for all to enjoy.

Avoid a Mahogany Row

Keeping all managers together with offices lined up may seem an efficient method to encourage cross-organization communication among the senior staff. It also can help private, senior-level communications stay private. However, this isolation clearly sets the seeds for the development of an “us versus them” mentality, isolating senior managers from the staff. If senior management offices are in a separate wing or floor, the isolation becomes even more problematic. It is hard for employees to accept the “My door is always open” philosophy if their managers are isolated from them. To avoid this situation, managers should occupy spaces within the seating arrangement of their departments. In addition to breaking up the mahogany row perception, it will make the managers more visible.

Intermix Department Seating

Similar to a mahogany row arrangement described above, seating departments separately from one another can also create an “us versus them” mentality. As discussed in the article in this collection “*Silo is Four Letter Word*”, employees in each department can develop rigid structures in which “their” goals become all important at the expense of other department goals as well as the company’s overall goals. Isolated seating between departments helps to further define rigid silos. Intermixed department seating will help to create common friendship bonds between individuals. Sharing of issues that cross department boundaries and an appreciation for other points of view will be natural outcomes of common environments.

Office Style

Significantly upscale furniture enjoyed by a few senior staff members can negatively impact the entire organization. It is hard for senior management to preach the practice of prudent expense management while they occupy plush surroundings. This issue will quickly surface, although seldom mentioned, during expense curtailment or reduction-in-force situations.

Open or Closed, Windowed or Windowless Offices

The lyric from a Harry Chapin song is “Empty spaces ask for filling”. With windowless or closed door offices or meeting rooms, employees may “wonder” what is happening inside. Seldom will they think positive thoughts. Visibility into these spaces naturally creates a feeling of trust.

Collaboration Spaces

With very few exceptions employees need to constantly work alone. Sharing ideas, problems, and workflow is essential. As discussed in the opening comments of this article, collaboration between individuals has become essential for most younger workers. Providing spaces, other than hanging out

around the water cooler, is a key to encourage collaboration. Multiple small, three or four-person meeting rooms, available on a first-come-first-serve basis, should be available in all work areas.

Standup Meeting Rooms

The lengthy, boring, ineffective meeting has become a common complaint across virtually all organizations. Unfortunately, many meetings have been replaced with email chains in which half the company (or so it seems) are copied. Of course, email comments are sent and received out of sync with little actual communications taking place. A good alternative is to quickly call adhoc meetings that are held in small conference rooms with no chairs, requiring everyone to stand. This environment will discourage lengthy conversations and unnecessary “back and forth” quibbling. Attendees are likely to only be individuals that are directly involved in the issue.