

How Large Firms Can Empower Every Employee

One of the major issues many PSMJ consultants and instructors see are firms wrestling with sudden growth. These expanding firms will often ask the same questions: "As we grow, how do we make sure all employees stay in touch with firm goals? How do we keep communication lines open between top leadership and employees?"

These firms would be well-served to look at the programs Dallas architecture firm HKS Inc. has developed. In the past five years, the firm has grown from 450 employees to more than 800. This growth has been driven by CEO Ralph Hawkins, FAIA, FACHA, winner of PSMJ's Outstanding Design Industry CEO of the Year Award for a Large Firm.

Early in Hawkins tenure as CEO, he found communication between staff members, departments, and offices to be a key issue. Under his direction, HKS implemented "Doublecheck", a company-wide program offering comprehensive training opportunities ranging from business etiquette to architectural codes. The firm also put in place new-hire orientation and mentoring programs, as well as an employee suggestion box, employee focus groups, and tenure and employee recognition programs.

In addition, HKS has developed the following programs:

- The firm has addressed the issue of communication through an intranet-based newsletter, an e-newsletter, work tips, project award announcements, and a company-wide magazine.

- **Compass: Chart Your Course** is a program that allows for employees to evaluate themselves, set goals for the next year, and receive feedback from a self-chosen mentor. The purpose of the process is to empower employees to define and achieve their goals through continuous feedback and coaching sessions.

- With HKS's Mentoring Program, a mentoring committee member contacts new employees during initial orientation, providing them with the opportunity to choose a mentor.

Under one banner

One of Hawkins short term goals was to establish a clear mission and values for everyone in the firm to understand and practice. Following review and discussion with representative HKS groups, the mission and 11 specific values were formed. The mission and values were then introduced to employees at the firm's annual meeting and later provided to each employee in the form of a poster.

Similarly, Hawkins oversaw the development of a three-year strategic plan. This document was distributed to all employees, providing a glimpse into the company's future plans. In addition, Hawkins promotes the sharing of financial and performance reports with all employees, allowing them to be informed stakeholders in the company.

The results

Developing these programs do require extra time and money investments. However, HKS has been able to trace real, measurable results of these efforts:

- HKS's annual turnover rate is well below the national average. On average, their staff has been with the firm seven years or more. More than 90 percent of staff is promoted from within — allowing existing employees opportunities to learn and grow with the firm.

- According to a recent "Best Places to Work" survey, more than 95 percent of HKS employees said that they would encourage a friend to seek employment with the company.

- Both HKS and Hawkins have received numerous accolades. In 2005, the firm was a national top-25 finalist for Fortune's "Best Bosses" and a finalist for the American Business Award's "Overall Best Company in America." ■