

Relationships: Understand, Communicate, Relate *A Challenge to Design Professionals*

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Do good relationships drive success? “Business speak” has emphasized relationship building for some time – but what is it? It is communication to be sure, but with all the tools now available for improved communication, it seems we communicate less. We have many tools available to us as practitioners, so many that in the din, we often cannot hear each other, i.e. why not walk over to your associate’s desk and ask a question about a mutual project, instead of emailing them? Witnessing this many times, along with experiencing the fallout from the misleading tone of some written missives, begs the question: how can we learn to truly and honestly exchange ideas and information with others? And isn’t good communication the key to good architecture?

After being partners with an architect spouse in a firm for over thirty-five years, we are looking back and evaluating what we learned by experience to pass on to others. We both knew that we wanted to be architects early in high school and believe that we made the right choice for ourselves. Architecture is a broad field rich with history, culture, art, science, and technology, but to practice our profession, we had a lot to learn outside of academia. Has a course in human relations ever been offered in a school of architecture? But how can you pursue your professional passion without understanding others?

Relationships depend on communication, and communication should offer an opportunity to demonstrate our interest in others and encourage their interest in return. It takes a verb – communicate – to build relationships. When one meets barriers in achieving positive relationships, it takes time to learn and adapt. Being excessively self-interested reduces or eliminates this aspect of communication. It’s important to be thoughtful, display humility, and start again. Sometimes this means working harder to listen or even “hear” at times what *isn’t* being said.

So, what are some of the keys to beneficial communication?

- **Respect.** Positive relationships are based on mutual respect and will inspire better outcomes, encouraging all to strive to improve and do their best. However, one must be cautious. Do not confuse sharing information with communicating. Real communication results in greater

understanding and connection. Communicating is striving to understand, and the outcome will not only be better work, but also positive improvements in the quality of our lives.

- **Language matters.** Know what needs saying and be careful how best to say it. We are all different, and we must accept this diversity to better communicate with others. This may be difficult with cultural differences and language barriers, and equally so with race and gender. The greatest failure is to think that communication has taken place when there has been no mutual understanding. Learn to read emotions and the nonverbal body language communicated by the other person as well.
- **Share.** Be willing to take and share risks. Fear reduces our ability to communicate and to develop meaningful relationships. Be willing to share success and what is learned in order to enhance relationships. Eliminate acting out of anger, and focus on compassion and forgiveness when there are misunderstandings – and, in the process, allow yourself and others to live without regret.
- **Be responsible.** Be sure you are understood. Ask questions, repeat or rephrase, and do not treat anyone’s failure to “get it” with hostility or condescension. Otherwise, you risk problems with and loss of the relationship simply from not listening to what is really being said or understood, or being too caught up in our own views. And the first and most important element in a relationship is to always follow through on your commitments. This develops trust and underscores respect for the relationship.

Balance among our relationships is of critical importance as well. In no particular order of importance, we thrive with success personally and professionally when:

- **Clients** are respected and trusted;
- **Colleagues and Staff** are treated with dignity;
- **Practices** possess values that include ethics;
- **Community** is served by the contributions of good citizenship;
- **Self and Family** are provided with caring and commitment.

As design professionals, we all seek to become “trusted advisors” to our clients. Achieving trust is based on honesty and genuinely caring for your clients and their success. We all have had difficult clients or clients we do not understand. Some of these barriers may be cultural, but whatever the

problem, as architects the process is as important as the project. Recalling a client who had created a very successful chain of fitness clubs and who wanted to drive every aspect of each project, continually reinventing what his clubs could be, our staff felt we could help him “improve” his ideas – which translated to him as our not listening. He respected our expertise, but in the end, we lost his business. “Architect ‘splaining” did not work; we learned that we are all different, complete with quirks.

How should we have worked with our staff and consultants to improve this client’s experience? We were compassionate and caring employers who wanted those qualities to transfer to staff in a way that helped them improve their client relationships and their relationships with each other. I am convinced that architects are very often introverts who “speak at” clients more than they listen to them. The time spent working with staff on their “soft skills” is critical to successful relationships, and we didn’t spend enough time coaching. We did learn that how we dealt with mistakes or project problems improved as we invited early discussion involving the client on what options and solutions might be possible. We learned that client expectations changed in a positive way when trust was enhanced. Our staff learned that you must be present for the bad times as well as the good. It’s part of the job, reduces stress and provides greater satisfaction when you have successfully solved an issue and have remained on friendly terms with your client.

Facing another project challenge when a schedule and budget posed by a client appeared to be insurmountable by our assigned project architect, and addressing the client’s needs became impossible for that staff member – but became possible with another staff person. What one professional would not listen to nor re-evaluate through the client’s vision did prove to become a successful project. We were fortunate that this client gave us a second chance with a change in personnel, and we answered his honesty in asking us for a new start by matching him with someone who would listen and believe in his project.

The public and our communities place great trust in design professionals. The granting of our license allows us to practice as architects and with that, we carry an obligation to serve. I believe that one of the most rewarding aspects of practice has been service to community and profession. We encouraged our staff to commit themselves to community service as well and found that they too found great satisfaction and recognition in helping where they could. As we experienced, this sort of participation helped build our skills as effective communicators. But the most important outcome came from those whose lives were affected in positive and thoughtful ways. This was nowhere more evident than our experience working with women, children, and the homeless. As creative problem solvers, I have found that architects also can serve as effective members of boards and commissions and it would be even better if there were more architects in public office.

Lastly, we cannot forget our relationships with friends, family and ourselves. It goes without saying that there should be equal, if not greater effort given to being a good parent and spouse, a good and caring friend and a supportive family member to our siblings and parents. Honesty, strong ethics, trust, and openness are all values important to professional success and even more important in our personal lives. As well, it is important to be happy, and happiness is infectious!

Great relationships resulting from effective communication inform every aspect of our lives. They lead to trust and contribute to the meaning we seek in our work, in citizenship, and with our families and friends. It takes hard work and continuing attention, but in the end, together, we will be inspired to achieve great things.