

Aspiring to Mediocrity

By Don Thompson

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If consulting engineering and architectural firms were issued report cards, only 10 percent would rate a grade of A. Another 10 percent would take home a failing grade of D. The remaining 80 percent would rate a B or C, with the majority falling in the B/C+ range - in other words, mediocre. Since this is obviously a popular classification, I thought we'd take a look at the factors that "qualify" a firm to be mediocre.

HIRE MEDIOCROPE PEOPLE

Hiring mediocre people is the real secret behind becoming a mediocre team. The New York Yankees recently won the World Series - the A+ of major league baseball. This is only possible when you have the right mix of top-notch players. Attaining the right mix starts by identifying each position that is needed and carefully selecting the best player to fill every spot.

Mediocre design firms don't have to waste all of the time and patience that are necessary to achieve such a well-oiled machine of a team. When a staff member is needed, they quickly hire the next available degreed professional or at least someone with experience drawing lines and making calculations. If you want to reach the heights of mediocrity, don't give a thought to the future of newly-hired employees and their potential ability to someday fill positions such as project manager, team captain, or stockholder. The time you'll save can be used to put out fires.

'Good enough is good enough' for mediocre firms

FORGET TRAINING

Training is an area where the A teams waste a lot of money that can be saved by those aspiring to be mediocre.

Executives with mediocre teams tend to

spend their time marketing, making speeches, designing projects, or putting out fires; they don't have to devote energy to building an organization through training their staff members. They feel that staff personnel are paid to do their jobs and they should know how to do them without being told. This saves a lot of time that would otherwise be spent conducting in-house training programs or investigating outside sources of education such as local technical schools or management seminars.

MONITORING PRODUCTIVITY

Excellence, which is highly prized by leaders of A teams, needn't be a concern for executives of mediocre teams. Those A team managers might even go so far as to demand a computer printout that shows the project manager's productivity over the previous week, including the percentage of work completed on a project, how much of the fee is left on that project, and the net multiplier achieved to date. This is their way of keeping project managers accountable for their performance, but it sure is bothersome.

Mediocre teams do not know what has been produced, only what has been billed. They don't feel it's necessary to be aware of the percentage completed and come to think of it, the project manager probably wouldn't know that anyway. People don't want to be held accountable for their actions and productivity, so why make anyone uncomfortable by showing them they are not performing up to expectations. "Good enough" is good enough for mediocre firms.

WHAT LONG-TERM PLAN?

Mediocre firms do not spend money on consultants to help them create a strategic plan for the future or find ways to improve their firm's performance. While

the A teams are spending a few days away from the office analyzing their long-term goals and actions, the executives at mediocre firms are right where they should be putting out fires, terminating under-qualified personnel, and hiring the next mediocre performer. These executives are so busy doing the urgent that they don't have time for the important. These same executives are reactive as opposed to those A team executives who are proactive. One responds to problems while the other works to prevent them.

The mediocre team is too busy dealing with today to worry about tomorrow.

Mediocre firms are price sensitive. They feel that most clients buy their services because they offer the lowest prices.

HIGH TURNOVER

Turnover is costly. Firms spend thousands of dollars during the course of each new hire's learning curve. This may be charged to slowness, re-doing work, or training. A teams have lower staff turnover rates than their mediocre counterparts. This is largely due to the perception of staff members that they are learning, growing and taking on new responsibility in a supportive, constructive atmosphere. Players on an A team feel a sense of belonging. They are in the know, they are involved in decisions that affect the firm, and they see their own future in the firm.

Mediocre teams do not have to bother with building team spirit or worrying about the future success of their staff. They are content to continue the revolving door hiring policy and, in time, they succeed in building a staff that will accept mediocrity because the staff is, in fact, mediocre. These are people who

have found a rut and a lifetime home.

PRICE IS EVERYTHING

Mediocre firms are price sensitive. They feel that most clients buy their services because they offer the lowest price.

The client-driven A team prices its service on value: the dollars paid for professional services are determined by the value to the client, not on the cost to the provider. They listen to the client. They determine client expectations and deliver beyond them whenever possible.

The mediocre team assumes they know what the client needs and will deliver what they want the client to have, at a price.

INCENTIVE PROGRAMS

In an effort to reduce turnover and reward good performers the A team uses an incentive program. A list of expectations and a method of measuring performance is agreed upon by managers and staff at the beginning of the year. The incentives can be sizable, even 25 to 50 percent of employees' base salaries.

The mediocre team avoids any possible hassle by not having an incentive plan. Besides, there is not enough profit to make a meaningful distribution. If a bonus is given, it is something on the order of one day's pay for each staff member. This rewards poor performers the same as good performers and eliminates any argument about fairness.

EMPLOYEE OWNERSHIP

It has been said that a good project manager is a future competitor or partner. Allowing key employees to become partners by selling them shares of stock in the firm is a status symbol used by A teams. It allows the employee a bigger picture of the entire firm instead of just his or her project, section or team. These key employees often make up the steering committee that helps guide the firm. These same people will probably buy the remaining company stock when the founder wants to retire. By that time, they will have gained the knowledge and experience to run the company because they have put in years of being exposed to the top level of management.

The mediocre firm doesn't bother with

this nonsense. The founder wants to make all decisions himself. He knows his people are not qualified to make these decisions because they don't have the experience or the knowledge. That's good because the leader of a mediocre firm doesn't want employees knowing too much about his business.

In an effort to reduce turnover and reward good performers the A team uses an incentive program.

THE DECEPTION

"It ain't what we don't know that hurts us, it's what we know that ain't so." The A team knows they are a cut above the rest. They set and meet goals constantly to hold that position. They are involved in strategic planning sessions, structured training programs, and are always on the lookout for exceptional people to bring into their team.

The mediocre team thinks they are just as good as the A team, at a lower price. This false assumption allows them to continue on in the same rut year after year. A resistance to change is natural, and this group fights it at every turn. The A team, on the other hand, welcomes growth and is continually determining the direction and specifics of needed changes.

There is nothing wrong with being mediocre and getting a C on your report card; after all, there are many others who fall in that category. Design firms that earn Cs can take consolation in the fact that they are not alone and are probably as good as most of their competitors. Design firm leaders determine the mission, philosophy, and culture of their firms. To those leaders who are complacent in their mediocrity, I can only offer this advice: don't claim to be in the majors when you're playing Triple-A baseball.

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Sites to See

The following is a list of web sites from the A.O.L.S. or related organizations. Every effort has been made to ensure that the addresses are up-to-date and correct.

If your firm's web site is not listed here and would like to be, please contact the Association office:

The Association of Ontario Land Surveyors
<http://www.interlog.com/~aols>

Alberta Land Surveyors Association
<http://www.sawka.com/alsa/>

Gord Campbell
<http://infoweb.magi.com/~cadastre/>

R.A. Fligg Surveying Limited
<http://www.bconnex.net/~mcgms/rafligg/rafligg.htm>

GEOSurv
<http://www.magi.com/~geosurv>

Marshall Macklin Monaghan
<http://www.mmm.ca>

Blain Martin
<http://www.interlog.com/~blain/bookmarks.htm>

Teranet
<http://www.teranet.on.ca>

Verhaegen Stubberfield Hartley Brewer Bezaire Inc
http://www3.sympatico.ca/vshbb_inc/

All-West Land Surveys Ltd (Alberta)
<http://www.sawka.com/allwest/>

CHECK OUT THE NEW

MEMBERS ACCESS FEATURE

<http://www.interlog.com/~aols>