



A MATRIX FOR DEFINING YOUR PRACTICE

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An architecture firm with a long-standing record of a service to a nearby university anguishes over the university's decision to hire a "star" firm, one with whom it has no history, to design its new physics building. An engineering firm, recognized throughout the profession as a star for its innovative work in energy and cost efficient mechanical systems, finds that it can't crack the door of another university, one who turns to the firm on whom it has relied for decades. These situations are neither new nor isolated. What can we learn from them?

The key to it all is value. Understanding what each client seeks and what the firm provides has always been a linchpin of successful practice. Refining that understanding can help firms position themselves to provide requisite value in the future.

Background

Due largely to the most recent recession— one that is history according to economics, but continuing very strongly in attitudinal shifts, client sophistication, and general senses about value and price— the world in which clients and consultants operate differs greatly from the pre-recession days. The recession served to weed from the market, particularly the private sector, "marginal" clients— clients whose ability to be clients in the 1980's was very much a consequence of the ease with which they could get funding for their projects. The clients who remain, and those who entered the arena during and after the recession are generally smarter and more sophisticated— they have to be if they are to survive— and more aware of the kinds of services and value that they need from the design and construction process.

The environment in which all design and construction activity occurs is more demanding and more complex than ever before, and it is not surprising that the breadth of knowledge and expertise required to plan, design, fund, and build anything has increased significantly. Add to the equation the fact that private and public entities have chosen, or been forced, to become leaner, thereby reducing the expertise that many can keep within their own organization. Clients and players alike realize that extensive effort goes into establishing a good understanding and working relationship. Once such relationships are in place, the motivation is high to continue them.

Project-Centered Versus Consulting-Centered

Many clients are now in a better position to know when to hire architects and engineers to solve specific problems or to take on particular challenges. Call these

situations ones in which the design team is retained to undertake a project. At the other end of a spectrum are situations where the clients seek counsel from outsiders to help make decisions that shape its future. It is very significant, however, that the firm that consults to shape the client's future may not be seen by the client as the firm to design all, or in some cases, even any, of the components of that future. Stated simply, the ability to consult does not necessarily coincide with the perceived ability to design, whether that design be application of existing concepts and standards or more innovative.

When the potential residential client calls the architect whose work graces several magazines to learn of the architect's interest in designing a home for them, the resulting project will be less a consulting kind of relationship than the architect being sought to undertake a particular, finite project. When a municipality seeks the engineering firm that designed a highly successful sewage treatment facility that was cited by the national engineering media to learn of the firm's availability to design a similar one, it is another example of a project-specific request. In each of these examples, the role of undertaking a specific project is larger than the role of consulting to the client, yet both are present.

As contrasting examples, consider the foreign public and private sector clients who seek knowledge and technology from the United States for help in leading them in the right direction. When leaders of American architecture and engineering firms are invited to East Asia and to former Soviet Bloc countries, it is at least as much for their insight about the future of the countries and of specific clients, although the initial invitations stem from the firms' track record for particular kinds of projects.

A Critical Point: The basis for the opportunity to consult is the credibility earned from the ability demonstrated by having undertaken projects successfully. Note also that only rarely do these consulting roles start at the inception of a relationship. Far more frequently they result from the simultaneous evolution of personal relationships, respect for project-specific expertise, and a sense by the client of deep understanding and sincere caring by the consultant.

Delivery Versus Innovation: Another Spectrum

The residential example cited earlier was about a firm being sought because of its creative solutions; its projects are near the innovative end of the spectrum. Similarly, the engineering firm was sought because of the innovative nature of another project. Consider also the mechanical engineering firm that is requested to submit its credentials and ultimately is hired to design a routine air handling system for a school expansion, the civil engineering firm that is hired to plan the streets and infrastructure of a subdivision, or the architect who is hired to design a mid-rise office building that the client wants to blend in with the rest of the previously designed corporate campus. These are projects nearer the other end of the spectrum. Wherever on the spectrum the projects fall, if successful they provide to the

respective clients the kind of value that they targeted at the onset. Common among them all is that each of these project-centered assignments requires the architect or engineer to follow tightly defined client-initiated, project-specific guidelines.

Firms that find success as "deliverers" understand that one key to their success is delivering proven, refined results efficiently, while recognizing the importance of their product being contemporary. "Deliverers" devote energy to refining results of their own and others' past efforts, and have systematized approaches.

Successful "innovators" show significantly different characteristics than their delivery oriented counterparts. They understand that one key to their success is solving new or challenging problems and providing creative solutions. They spend less energy refining past results, and draw on collaborative, brainstorming techniques to determine the project delivery process. Their teams are structured to encourage contact with creative project leaders and creative clients, however, since "innovators" rely heavily on strong intuitive skills to keep projects on course, they often have difficulty tracking progress status accurately.

There are satisfied, successful firms positioned throughout these models (just as there are less satisfied, less successful firms positioned throughout it). Being pejorative ô finding places of nobility within that modelô is not the issue, nor is it with the model that is the subject of this paper. Instead, the intent is to help firm leaders increase their ability to satisfy clients, evolve and reward their organizations.

Developing a Strategy

Very few firms succeed by being only consulting-centered or only project-centered, only innovators or only deliverers, and the reasons are quite simple: After a few years of existence, firms find the majority of their work is repeat work with prior and current clients, and while some of these clients may want only the same kind of service and product they got before, most clients have changing needs.

To succeed and to sustain success, firms need to understand how to serve in all areas of the model, recognizing that the lasting relationships are likely to encounter a wider gamut of specific services that the firm will either provide or coordinate the delivery by other firms. For most firms, the marketing, selling, and relationship building effort and expense leads to treasuringô owningô the client. Most firms with that relationship understand their own strengths and limitations, their value in the eyes of the client, and may well not be the best providers of all the services the client will need. However, an interesting strategy may well evolve, although there are only few instances to date: To the extent that having a close client relationship leads to a better service, the firm may choose to offer more and more capabilities and in effect become a one-stop shopping place for the client, but a shopping place to which the client wants to go because with it goes the kind of relationship of the

boutique. A major challenge in such a strategy is to provide these multi-discipline, inter-discipline, or expanded discipline skills at a consistent quality level.

Leadership

A major shortcoming within the design professions today is the lack of effective leadership that does more than manage the firm and maintain relationships; more desirably, it also excites the staff and envisions a promising future. Leadership is most effective when the leaders' strengths lie in what the firm is selling, whether it is the project-focused expertise in a "project-centered" firm or the relationship and insight qualities of the "consulting-centered" firm.

The starting point is an objective assessment of internal strengths, potentials, and interests, coupled with an equally objective assessment of the various market sectors and opportunities that are realistic for the firm to consider. The firm's leaders can then decide what kinds of clients and projects will provide the professional and financial rewards they seek, the steps the firm needs to take to be capable of providing value to its target clientele, and what they as leaders must do to move steadily forward.

Characteristics of "Client-Centered" and "Project-Centered" Practitioners

Project-Centered	Client-Centered
Focus on the near- and mid-term.	Focus on the mid- and long-term.
Clients feel that they truly care about them, and they are highly project-focused.	Clients feel that they truly care about them, and they are highly client-focused.
Have better than average communication and conflict resolution skills.	Have better than average communication and relationship skills.
Keen observers of the world around them, particularly as it relates to technical change.	Keen observers of the world around them, particularly as it relates to their clients.
Strive continually to learn, and consequently have cultures that foster learning and sharing of information.	Continually strive to learn, and consequently have cultures that foster learning and sharing of information.
Bring to clients' attention issues that affect current projects and activities.	Bring to clients' attention information about issues that will affect their clients' futures.
Understand that the value they provide is primarily in success of projects, and that their profitability results from their ability to target and achieve their clients' goals efficiently.	Understand that their priority is the consulting role and the value they provide is primarily measured by their clients' sense of long-term success.

