

Building a New Office, and a New Culture

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The emphasis on office teamwork is reshaping commercial office space. More open floor plans are being built or remodeled.

But getting employees to go along with the changes may take more effort than the physical construction.

“In many cases a company will decide to make this very big physical change and word will leak out and people will rebel because people take their work spaces very seriously,” said Suzanne Haas, a consultant and principal of the Williams Group in Grand Rapids. “If people don’t understand why the changes are taking place, they typically are very unhappy moving into the space and therefore the company never accomplishes the ultimate goal—increasing productivity through teamwork and collaboration.”

Haas frequently works with Steelcase Inc. [NYSE: SCS] when companies consolidate several offices into one, downsize to make more efficient use of real estate or build new headquarters architecturally very different from their old one.

The rebellion is more than ordinary resistance to change. New space—especially if open floor space replaces private offices—means new ways of working. Companies must transform their work culture while they transform the physical space, Haas said. A successful move is typically a two-year process.

“What our experience has taught us,” she said, is that “there are five really important things to do. Communication is one of the five things and, really, the last of the five.”

New space is supposed to function as a business tool, so a company first must define how it will affect its business direction.

Second, executives must lead by example.

“If you don’t have the people at the top of an organization embracing this project in a very visible way, nobody is going to want to change their behavior,” Haas said.

“Typically corporate executives have very big, spacious offices with all sorts of amenities. If they believe the best way to perform is by teaming and collaborating, then their environment should reflect that as well. They need to be a model for the others.”

Third on her list is involving middle managers. If they are not clear why the change is being made and what benefits the company anticipates from it, they cannot handle employee questions or communicate enthusiasm.

Fourth is cultivating what Haas called a “passionate user group.”

Workers representative of employee opinions must be listened to as the building plans take shape. That includes taking opinion surveys, showing them mock-ups of new work spaces, seeking their input on colors, even asking for menu suggestions for the cafeteria.

“Through the process, these people become opinion leaders,” Haas said.

“They will share what they know with their colleagues that persuade other people that this change is going to be OK. You never eliminate 100 percent of the dissent, but you minimize it to the point the vast majority are comfortable with the move.”

Only after the other four steps have been taken is a company ready to communicate with employees, she said. The company should help them learn to work in new ways.

Portage-based psychologist Suzan Olson has helped health care agencies through similar space changes.

“If you don’t put money into the design, you’re going to spend a lot more money in wasted human resources and turnover. It can be the difference between a vibrant company and a company that goes under,” said Olson, partner and chief operating officer of Midwest Consultants for Clinical Trials.

As a human factors—that is, ergonomics—psychologist, Olson works with the capabilities and limitations of human beings as they interact with jobs, tasks, processes or systems. Olson worked with Bronson Medical Center’s new building in Kalamazoo.

They did it right, she said.

Administrators analyzed the hospital’s culture at the time, whether it tied in with the hospital’s mission and whether it accomplished the hospital’s goals, Olson said. In the process, they also looked at each department’s culture.

“They got information that intuitively they knew, but didn’t have the data to support,” Olson said. “These research findings helped them to chart their course and take them on the journey they anticipated going for the next 100 years.”

Every choice in workplace design had its pluses and minuses, she said.

Using more than 50 years’ data, human factors psychology can define trade-offs as specific as amount of noise reduction—positive—to reduced natural light—negative—due to height of cubicle walls.

With the data, managers can make informed choices that will aid productivity and workplace satisfaction.

