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STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

Upfront

Creative Spaces: Five tips for designing workplaces that nurture great ideas

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Stanford Social Innovation Review
Fall 2007

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Creative Spaces

Five tips for designing workplaces that nurture great ideas

Three years ago, the Portland (Ore.) Office of Sustainable Development hosted a green building conference at the Jean Vollum Natural Capital Center (NCC), a renovated brick warehouse where environmentally and socially responsible businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies rent office and retail space. Sydney Mead popped in on the conference, as did many other people who work in the NCC building.

“All of us had a good laugh at the presentation on waterless urinals,” remembers Mead, program manager of Ecotrust, a conservation organization that owns the building and whose headquarters are on the second floor.

But as the NCC’s various tenants kept bumping into each other at the first floor’s Fair Trade coffee shop and Patagonia store, or at talks in the third-floor conference center, or at events on the fourth-floor terrace, they found themselves chatting more and more about the urinals.

“We realized that installing waterless urinals in the center would raise awareness about water conservation,” Mead says. “People in Portland don’t take water conservation seriously because we have too much water,” she says, “but this is the next big issue.” After securing a special variance from the state, the NCC installed waterless urinals this June.

The NCC illustrates what Franklin



The Jean Vollum Natural Capital Center in Portland, Ore., is designed to spark innovation. Comfortable, informal shared spaces like the open lobby of Ecotrust, an environmental nonprofit, inspire creativity and encourage conversation.

Becker has discovered over 25 years of research and consulting: Workspaces that encourage employees to communicate informally and face to face often nurture the most innovative ideas and practices. Becker, who is chairman of the department of design and environmental analysis at Cornell University, notes that during these casual interactions employees build trust, share knowledge, bounce seemingly unrelated ideas off each other, and hatch big plans.

In a recent issue of the *California Management Review* (vol. 49, no. 2), Becker gives these five tips for designing workplaces that breed invention:

1. Design at human scale. Most organizations aim to contain entire departments in one place, even if that means taking up a whole office building floor. Yet organizing people into smaller communities helps them trust, learn from, and create with each other. And so breaking up departments into cozier offices helps the cause of innovation more than does letting employees sprawl throughout a single large space.

At the NCC, for example, most office spaces are rented by single organizations with 10 to 40 people. Suc-

cess is making their spaces even snuggier: “We aren’t trying to make people work in smaller spaces, but all of the organizations have grown enormously since moving in,” says Mead. She notes, however, that exposed brick walls, old-growth timbers, and arched windows make the NCC “so airy and lofty, it doesn’t feel small.”

2. Don’t fence employees in. The easier it is for employees to see what others are doing, the easier it is for them to learn one another’s work styles, ask questions, share insights, and coordinate plans, says Becker. Tall walls and closed doors are the enemies of innovation.

The NCC, for example, has an open floor plan with no traditional offices. Instead, 4-foot-5-inch-high dividers delineate work stations. Moreover, the main stairway goes through the middle of the second-floor offices, so that tourists, employees, and conference attendees are constantly streaming by, bringing with them ideas and observations. “We are always on display,” says Mead.

3. Vary work settings. Different kinds of people need different kinds of environments to inspire different kinds of thinking. Within the NCC,

for instance, employees can wander among retailers, a bank, a healthcare center, foundation and nonprofit offices, government agencies, the conference center, the terrace, and a parking lot farmers market.

In addition, tenants themselves represent a range of environmental concerns, philosophies, and strategies, says Mead: “We are mimicking an ecosystem. We wanted as diverse a range of causes as possible so that we can get ideas from our neighbors.”

4. Make work a little inconvenient. Forcing people to walk farther, share their resources, and vary where they sit increases the chances that each day will be a bit different. Accordingly, at the NCC, “we share photocopiers,

printers, supply rooms, and the kitchen, which are in the core of the building.” Around these shared resources, employees connect, brainstorm, and turn humorous musings – such as those about the waterless urinals – into action items.

5. Ditch the status markers. The less a workspace marks status and rank, the freer employees will feel to let fly with their wacky ideas. Status markers, such as cordoned executive offices and reserved seats, not only physically block employees from informally interacting; they also symbolically discourage employees of different ranks from openly discussing their ideas. This is why some of the best ideas are crafted in bathrooms

and corridors, rather than in boardrooms and offices, notes Becker.

The absence of formal offices in the NCC, coupled with its constant stream of visitors and casual culture, makes employees feel comfortable talking shop across organizational and hierarchical lines, says Mead. “Kindergartners are pressing their faces to the glass all the time,” she notes. “And the yoga balls have multiplied over the past few years,” she laughs.

Becker suggests another hierarchy-flattening piece of furniture: “The [former] Digital Equipment Corporation office in Finland used to hold meetings on swing sets. It’s hard to have a tense meeting on a swing set.”

–Alana Conner

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