A New Vocabulary for Workplace Strategy

A few months ago this column wrote about some significant changes that three New York City-based companies made to their built environments as a direct result of Superstorm Sandy. Prior to the storm, all three of these companies had what they believed to be thoughtful workplace strategies, yet these on-the-spot decisions – however positive for the business - were not part of any master plan. That fact, plus the likelihood that these decisions would never have been made had these companies not been forced to work differently in Sandy's immediate aftermath, begins to call the way we go about creating workplace strategy into question.

Lou Gerstner, former IBM CEO, once said "Strategy is the creative leap that involves making decisions…not a tool to merely execute a project plan based on past precedents." Too often, however, workplace strategy begins by building upon the past and ends falling short of what the future could be. What's needed is a way to bring more immediacy to the process that facilitates better-informed and timelier decision making. This got me thinking that perhaps if we could talk about strategy differently, we might be able to enhance the process. So I set about developing some new language to refresh, not replace, traditional workplace strategy methods. I offer for your consideration: **Proof Statements, Efficacy, Re-Assessment, Behaviors, Change Communication, and Pilots.** As a work in-progress, comments about (and additions to) this new vocabulary are invited.

Combine Benchmarking with Proof Statements

Benchmarking is an important part of workplace strategy in that it informs us on best practices. However, as its focus is generally on quantitative (to the exclusion of qualitative) data, and stats like rsf/person and $/rsf are relative, benchmarking should be considered only a starting point. Proof statements, on the other hand, combine both quantitative and qualitative information, and relate directly to business problems solved or goals achieved. Any company can relate such metrics as reduced absenteeism or health claims; number of job applicants and new clients; time required to close a deal or get a product to market directly to what that means for their business. Companies that can relate project performance directly to business goals can also be more agile by being able to make not only make better informed, but more timely decisions.

Plan with Efficacy Not Just For Capacity

Capacity planning is standard procedure in building selection. If the program doesn't fit, either the planning model or the building has to give. But in an existing location, planning is an entirely different matter. Over the past year, our firm has done a dozen test fits for a company's existing location. Because continuing to squeeze more people together further diminishes functionality as well as employees' experience of the space, we think the company's planning model has to change. So we've begun a conversation about planning with efficacy to produce a desired effect for the business. This certainly includes capacity, but not to the exclusion of understanding that certain space types are essential to support actual work patterns and can't be eliminated to accommodate growth. Put simply, this is designing to fit the business, not just the building.

Re-Assess Before Programming
Any project is a "change event" and any change is an opportunity to test the boundaries of what could be. Nonetheless, many companies want to jump into programming right away using current (and historical) departmental and headcount information. Like financial returns, this information is more likely to be an indicator of the past rather than a harbinger of the future. Important to consider but (like benchmarking) not the whole story, especially when an organization is trying to implement new processes or encourage new behaviors. Gathering information from surveys, observational studies, town halls, charrettes and pilots can better inform programming, and enrich the design process in ways that programming alone never could.

Look at Behaviors Not Adjacencies
Each and every day, factors including the globalization, mobilization and densification of the workforce, along with increased collaboration and ubiquitous technology, call the relevance of workplace adjacencies into question. Looking at behaviors instead of (or in addition to) adjacencies helps us understand and design for how people work and who they work with, not just who they work for. Freeing the planning process – even somewhat – from departmental adjacencies builds agility and dynamism into the workplace as it allows team to come together and reform as needed. Of course if space allocation is charged back to the business units, this means looking at departmental Profit and Loss (P&L) reports differently. But eliminating territories to better plan for flexibility and growth would be a big plus for the business.

Communicate Don't Manage Change
People don't want to feel they are being managed, but they do want to be kept in the loop. And because people will talk - more so when they don't know what's happening - communicating early and often throughout a transition process gives people a voice and makes them part of the solution. But since change is almost constant, communication should be too. Organizations that create a continuous feedback loop are more inclusive, have a finger on the pulse that facilitates continuous improvement, and have an easier time navigating change.

Replace Mockups with Pilots
Would you marry the prettiest girl in the beauty contest without getting to know her first? That's what making a decision based on a mockup is like. The problem isn't mockups per se, but that mockups are part of a bidding process that keeps suppliers and companies at arm's length. Because bidding is not going away, lets incorporate ways to test for compatibility into the vetting process to determine if company and supplier are a fit. That would take significant supplier opportunity costs off the table that they could reinvest in collaboration with the client to test new ideas through a series of pilots. The process would not only help companies plan more proactively, but would create continuity and develop shorthand (another new language) so valuable in today's ever changing work environment.

Change the Language; Change the Results
Wasn't it Albert Einstein who famously defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results? Today, more than ever, companies need workplaces that can continue to evolve and adapt to change. A new language could just redefine the process, and in doing so, enhance the results.

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ABOUT THE CENTER FOR WORKPLACE INNOVATION
People are a company's most valuable asset and in today's business environment it is people who make the difference. Our mission is to combine real estate, technology and business processes to create exceptional spaces that empower people to do their best work. We align design solutions with actual business drivers and create performance metrics to establish a feedback loop that continues to inform. This builds agility into the workplace to support the way people work today while enabling its evolution to support the way they will work in the future.