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BEST PRACTICES

How to Avoid a Toxic Work Culture

Several firm leaders offer tips for resisting and reversing a negative corporate environment.

By [JEFF LINK](#)



Architects work notoriously long hours, often to deliver design deliverables on a tight schedule or to iterate on more concepts. Add to that high-pressure environment office drama, poor leadership, and selfish individuals and you have a recipe for toxic work culture.

Here, several firm leaders share their advice for resisting—and reversing—a negative corporate environment.

Know Who to Hire—and Fire

Hiring the right people is an essential pre-emptive move, says David Keith, AIA, CEO and design principal of the Norfolk, Va.-based firm [Hanbury](#). Having experienced frustration with colleagues at mid-sized regional

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practices earlier in his career, Keith says Hanbury's cultivation of a healthy work culture starts with its hiring process, which includes a rigorous four-hour interview. "I have a 'no-assholes' rule in hiring and try really hard to find out how people respond to pressure by asking them questions, checking references, and letting them go on a casual lunch with staff members at similar experience levels," Keith says. "We never hire primadonnas who can't get along with others, regardless of their talent level."

But even a scrupulous hiring process is no guarantee that employees will exercise civility and professionalism during intense periods of work. "[Sometimes] people who are typically good mentors blow up at people," Keith says. After such an incident, his first course of action is to have an honest but constructive conversation with the offender saying "this didn't work out the way we'd hoped. Let's talk about why you made that decision, and how it could have gone a different way." But when outbursts persist, letting go of insubordinate employees is often the best policy.

"People can get to the point where they feel leadership is not dealing with the situation," Keith says. "And that is very dangerous and very toxic."

Prioritize a Reasonable Work-life Balance

Bob Borson, FAIA, principal of the Dallas-based [Malone Maxwell Borson Architects](#) (MMBA) and curator of the blog and podcast "Life of an Architect," says excessively long work days are a common, but avoidable, peril of the profession. A carryover from architecture school, the "bragging rights" mentality of pulling all-nighters and high billable-hour requirements—real or perceived—can deprive employees of work-life balance, increase attrition, and be a poor stand-in for work quality. Borson debunks the belief that more time in the office means "you're a great employee."

It is not uncommon for younger employees to be motivated to work late—because they require more time than mature architects to work through a problem, see it as an opportunity to partake in a prestigious project, or sense an unspoken pressure to work extra hours. However, leadership should set clear expectations and standards as excessively long workdays can cause stress and resentment, particularly if senior designers do not share an equal burden. "I'm not going to ask an employee to do something that I myself won't do," Borson says. "I have a kid and I don't want to miss that time either."

At MMBA, staff work 10-hour days Monday through Thursday in exchange for a half day on Friday, and employees are encouraged to leave at the close of business. The 10-person studio rarely accepts projects that require overtime, and employees share project responsibilities when deadlines stack so that "no one is on an island," Borson adds.

Be Transparent

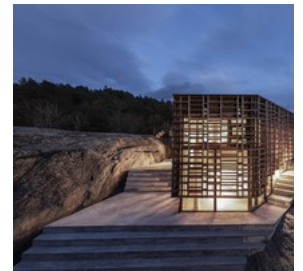
When a firm is facing major transitions, such as a leadership change or an economic downturn, management should realize that employee morale might diminish. [EDI International](#) experienced this firsthand when the lending market crashed in 2008.

"We were working with a sheikh from Dubai [who had] invested with Lehman Brothers. He lost half a billion dollars, and that slowed him down," says CEO Victor Mirontschuk, FAIA. "The long and short of it was that we couldn't get financing, and we were stiffed for millions and millions of dollars. That's not good when you've got 160 people on payroll."

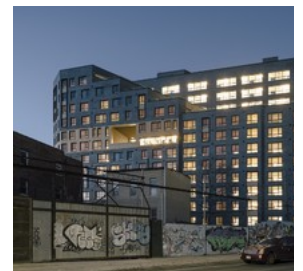
Recognizing that secrecy could spark malcontent and a lack of confidence in leadership, the six partners did not try to sugarcoat the impending fallout. In a series of staff meetings, they communicated openly about the developer's refusal to pay and the need for cuts. They closed their Newport Beach, Calif., office, abandoned



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plans for a new office, and made personnel cuts: first from support staff members and then from the core design team. A new salary agreement reduced employee compensation by 20 percent overall but provided to pay it back in bonuses when the firm made quarterly goals (which happened three of four quarters that year).

Though this strategy softened the blow, the firm ultimately saw a reduction to 30 employees. Still, honesty was the best course, helping to sustain trust and good-will among the remaining staff. "A woman yesterday celebrated her 36th anniversary, another one had her 35th," Mirontschuk says. "A lot of people have been with the firm for a long time. Without their support we couldn't have made it through the hard times. They are a great support to keep morale up."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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