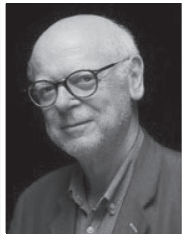


Q1 INFLUENCE: STEWARDSHIP

On Stewardship



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Lots of curious mumbling around the room indicated the prevailing mood of surprised anticipation as the fifty or so Principals and Shareholders assembled for the ‘extraordinary shareholder meeting’ that Chief Executive Ralph Hawkins had called at such very short notice. What on earth was this about? The management systems of HKS, one of the USA’s most successful practices, normally ran like a well-oiled clock: HKS didn’t do *extraordinary shareholder meetings*...

With the session called to order Hawkins moved rapidly to the point: an offer had come in to buy the company.....

Offers had become increasingly common in recent years as predators eyed the astonishing growth and success of the company that Harwood K Smith had founded way back in 1939 but, hitherto, they been routinely, even summarily, dismissed by the Executive Board. This one was different: the proffered figure was eye-watering, and a simple and rapid calculation revealed the possibility of riches beyond the imagination. Some of those present would never need to work again.

Sitting in the front row at the Dallas HQ that day was Ron Skaggs, company chair, founder of the HKS healthcare sector, and a then recent president of the American Institute of Architects. A legend in his own lifetime, under his leadership the HKS healthcare sector had become the largest architectural operation of its kind in the States. No matter which criteria was adopted - number of beds, square footage, or construction value - Skaggs’ team came out on top. None of its competitors designed more, and very few designed as well: HKS informed its healthcare work through research, and its knowledge base and expertise were beyond prodigious.

Next to Skaggs sat Joe Sprague. Joe’s c.v. said it all: a past manager of the Health Facility Codes and Standards Programs as well as past president of the AIA Academy of Architecture for Health, the Facility Guidelines Institute, and the American

College of Healthcare Architects, he was also a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, Fellow of the American College of Healthcare Architects, and a Fellow of the Health Facility Institute. As Chairman Emeritus he had played a pivotal role in developing the 'Guidelines for Design and Construction of Hospitals and Healthcare Facilities' annual publication. We have nothing like it in the UK, and it is invaluable to all involved in delivering this most complex of building genres.

Sprague's enormous contribution to his profession, to the construction industry, and to the wider community had, through the larger part of his distinguished career, been greatly supported and assisted through the aegis of HKS.

Likewise, the quality of contribution that thousands of first rank professionals around the globe make to their profession, their industry, and the wider community, is heavily dependent on the support of their companies. And this is the point: for every one of those professionals, it is critical that the corporate control of their company remains in enlightened hands. Their firms are the bedrocks of their careers; they are the platforms from which they operate, and from which they contribute. The importance of *stewardship* in this respect cannot be overstated.

Sprague and Skaggs had met as youngsters during military service. Legend had it that, back in those days, Skaggs had reported to Sprague. Ron liked to stand to attention and, with a mischievous grin, offer a mock salute when he relayed that story because, at HKS, Sprague reported to him. But either way, their careers had been inter-twined, their loyalty and commitment to service had remained absolute, and their friendship was unbreakable. And on Wednesdays, come rain or shine, they always had their \$5.99 enchilada lunch together at the El Fenix eatery just round the corner. And this was Wednesday; time was ticking!

Ralph was hardly into answering questions when Ron, in his typically polite but resolute manner, announced that he hadn't

put his life's work into the company to see it sold out. Ron went on to emphasise the contribution that HKS employees had made to the company's success and asserted quietly but firmly that it would not be right to "*sell them down the river*".

Others who spoke followed Ron's lead and, very quickly, the mood of the room had set: yet again, and despite the magnitude of the offer, HKS could not be bought. The CEO, sensing that the chicken enchiladas were calling (they take early lunch down south) thus brought the meeting to a close.

Hawkins had of course quite properly drawn the offer to the attention of his leadership team, but he nevertheless got the clear answer he had both expected and wanted: the company was not for sale. Money, however much, couldn't persuade its owners to cede control.

I tell this story because HKS has, through the decades, been an exemplar in terms of governance and stewardship. Like most great architectural practices, distinguished careers, generation after generation, are forged within its portals, but the deal is simple: the firm operates for clear purpose and against a set of well-defined principles. Furthermore, by traditionally picking its leadership from within, it protects its values, projects its culture, and preserves its character. And it makes its own future...it is privately owned so its accountable to no outside interests. Good stewardship has been critical both to its stability and to its success, and that stewardship has always lain in safe and trusted hands. Newcomers cannot expect to come in at the top, and it's a long road up at HKS. This brings us to the related issue of *succession*.....

Let's back up a century and more to that great leader, Abraham Lincoln, speaking during his election campaign to the Wisconsin State Agricultural society way up north in Milwaukee. There, against the majestic setting of Lake Michigan, Lincoln told the story of a monarch who had once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence that would be '*ever in*

view, and which should be true and appropriate in all times, and situations’. After careful deliberations they presented the future president with the words:

‘And this, too, shall pass away’

As US theologian Tim Townsend says, these words express so much: how chastening they are in the hour of pride! How consoling in the depths of affliction.... But what precisely do they mean, and why is this so relevant a line in the context of stewardship? Well, as my father often remarked: nothing lasts for ever, change is inevitable.

That is of course why Lincoln’s phrase is so pertinent to any kind of ministry, whether it be to the sick or to those otherwise in trouble or distress. Essentially, however bad, bleak, or indeed terrible the suffering or situation, there *will be an end*. And of course, for those of faith and those of optimism, there will always be a new dawn and a new tomorrow: it is in this context of inevitable and ongoing change, and of better tomorrows, that the notion of stewardship, and succession, is so important in our institutional and corporate lives. For good stewardship is essential in preserving values, maintaining focus, embracing worthy opportunities, and shaping future agendas. And well laid succession plans are essential to preserving the values that will inform good stewardship.

The Royal Institute of British Architects has a simple charter which calls for the advancement and promotion of architecture – not, you will note, architects, or British architecture, just *architecture*. In that sense it is both timeless in terms of relevance, and universal in terms of application. But against that charter, the Institute must both respond to changing circumstances, and indeed shape change. The former demands enlightened, informed, and selfless stewardship if the Institute is to maintain its course through seas rough and smooth. The latter requires us to seize new opportunities and set new agendas and chart new courses through hitherto unchartered



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waters. Intelligent, informed, and selfless stewardship is, again, essential.

Back to that far off day when HKS Shareholders took the decision not to sell, but instead to maintain control of the company’s affairs and destiny. In so doing they acted selflessly and against a higher calling. As ‘stewards’ they were not prepared to allow the company’s defining purpose (service to clients, and latterly, through fine design, to the wider

community) to be corrupted. Instead, they held on to the baton, until it was time to pass it on to others, *from within*, to whom it could be safely entrusted.

Succession is thus so important because ultimately the 'baton' must be passed on to future generations of leaders. They must be worthy of the heritage and the challenge ahead.

Sadly, too many UK post World War II architectural practices within the private sector (that is, non-municipal) fared very badly in terms of succession planning, especially when compared to other professional disciplines within the construction industry, or indeed to architectural practices in the USA. So, whilst a series of great UK engineering practices such as Ove Arup, Mott MacDonald, and latterly Buro Happold, established very well-defined cultures with management structures that seemed to transition seamlessly and successfully through generations of leadership, all too many of our larger and better architectural practices either lost their way in terms of design direction and quality, or simply withered on the vine.

Happily, we are now seeing a growing number of success stories as a subsequent generation of firms have taken succession planning very seriously and are continuing to flourish in terms of both design quality and quality of service as they face new and challenging agendas and circumstances. Grimshaw Architects (formerly Nicholas Grimshaw and Partners) is one good example; others include Richard Roger's practice (now RRP Stirk Harbour + Partners), Hopkins Architects (formerly Michael Hopkins and Partners) and Zaha Hadid Architects who of course tragically lost its founder so early.

In commercial terms each of these practices is incredibly successful, but neither commercial success, nor survival, is the primary call. What matters most is that such firms continue to evolve in a manner that is worthy of their respective heritages, and that they continue to produce design work of distinction. That is a demanding challenge in the widest sense of the term. In this respect, *stewardship* is everything.

Paul Hyett is a founding principal of Vickery-Hyett in the U.K., past president of the Royal Institute of British Architects and a regular contributor to DesignIntelligence.