

Larson Design Group

Larson Design Group (LDG) is a multi-disciplinary architectural, engineering, and surveying firm working within both public and private sectors. Based in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, the firm employs more than 200 professionals, with offices located in Selinsgrove, Bloomsburg, Ephrata, and Bethel, Pennsylvania, and Corning, New York.

LDG CEO Keith Kuzio credits the firm's success to its innovative and informed staff, dedication to core values, and focus on value-added service. "We have worked very hard to align personal and corporate goals in a manner that makes people want to be accountable and strive for success for the firm because it leads to success for them individually as well," says Kuzio.

Kuzio believes other firms could benefit from doing what LDG has done, but suggests that, in order to do so successfully, it "requires taking blinders off, seeing the existing culture and conditions in a firm for what they are, and then building from there, based on values that are important to the firm."

What has LDG done that your firm can learn from?

1. Employee ownership. Since 1993, LDG has followed an employee ownership model and is 100-percent employee owned. Therefore, all information (good and bad) is shared openly with employees through outlets including monthly meetings, a monthly payroll newsletter, etc. "Our employee owners know that 80 to 85 percent of our business comes from repeat clients, so responsiveness in communication and project completion are important," Kuzio says. "They also understand that invoicing is important to cash flow and that happy clients generally pay quicker than dissatisfied ones."

2. Mentoring. It is part of LDG's core values for all colleagues to work with new employees, helping them understand the LDG business model and culture. "When we look for new hires, we recruit from good schools, so we know they'll meet our technical requirements," says Kuzio. "Then we work with them as much as we can over the next two years as they get their feet wet."

The firm is currently working on developing a more formal mentoring system by creating a Coaches College and internal Leadership Academy. "The Coaches College is a program aimed at providing our firm with a uniform definition of what coaching means at LDG and providing skills training to assure that our senior managers are able to support the coaching that is a vital component of the leadership development program," Kuzio says.

LDG is designing a leadership development program that will work with employees with four to 10 years of experience. The program, starting in September, will be a series of five two- to three-day retreats held every few months over a two-year period, with participants working on on-the-job assignments and coaching sessions between retreats.

"Studies will include personal mastery, development of personal and organizational leadership skills, alignment of personal and organizational goals, and business topics that will be presented by subject-matter experts within the firm," Kuzio explains.

3. Marketing. One area LDG believes in investing in is marketing and business development. "Don't skimp on marketing," Kuzio says. "As long as you establish a good plan for implementation, benefits will come and it will be well worth the investment." LDG budgets \$590,000 per year on marketing and business development. LDG's strong marketing efforts not only come from the formal marketing materials they produce within their marketing department, but from the understanding that every employee is a marketer. "Because we share information, our employees understand where our needs are, and are ready to speak about the firm at any opportunity" Kuzio says.

4. Strategic reorganization. LDG restructured two departments in the summer of 2009, leading to the layoff of 10 employees. "Our financials did not require that we make these cuts and staff changes, but we saw the recession as a good time to sharpen our architectural staff skills and capabilities, picking up available talent from other firms that were forced to lay-off good employees in order to survive," Kuzio explains. LDG examined "the changing landscape of project delivery," moving to BIM, recognizing that their staffing mix and capabilities were not well aligned with the organization structure and capabilities that would be used in a 100 percent BIM-design environment. "We made the difficult decision to let go of some staff to be better organized to efficiently deliver BIM projects," says Kuzio.— MELISSA D'AMICO (mdamico@psmj.com) ■