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Lead your engineering firm into the future

Two ways to handle succession planning: prepare the next generation for leadership and attract talented millennials.

It's no secret that many engineering firms are still facing the impending loss of retiring leadership without a clear leadership transition plan in place. As the president of a 200-plus, full-service engineering firm, the future sustainability of our firm is always top of mind. How do we recruit and retain the most talented engineers? How do we maintain the same level of quality and service our firm has come to be known for as leadership changes?

Over the years, we've learned to answer those questions by focusing on two core components that go hand in hand: preparing the next generation for leadership and attracting talented millennials.

Leadership transitioning

The time is now to start planning for the next phase of leadership. Ask yourself: Do you have the right team in place to take over in the next 5 to 10 yr? Do your top engineers also have the business acumen to match?

With the goal of sustaining success well beyond current leadership, our firm began investing heavily in our future senior leaders through what we call a leadership development program (LDP). It's a 20-month internal educational program meant to grow the firm's mid-level leadership and successfully prepare them to take on senior roles moving forward.

The program doesn't focus on developing engineering skills. Instead, we offer lessons that even the best schools don't offer in their engineering curriculums—how to run an engineering firm. We train participants on the business skills that can only be learned on the job: leadership skills, business-unit management, effective communication, new-business development, successfully handling ethical dilemmas, developing relationships between offices, and more.

Since implementing the program, many of the graduates have internalized and applied the knowledge they gained throughout the program to continue to excel technically, enhance client relationships, improve communication skills, and mentor younger engineers. As a result, some of them have been named partners in the firm.

Recruiting millennials

Millennials make up half of the U.S. workforce and absolutely cannot be ignored. While engineering firms have historically offered very traditional workplace environments, that culture is going to have to change to not only attract but also retain the top talent of the millennial generation.

Millennials are looking for open, collaborative environments where they can give and receive feedback.

They're attracted to flexible scheduling and the use of technology on the job. They also love workplace perks such as fun programs or opportunities to give back to the community through work. While it may not be possible to incorporate all of these desires into your firm's culture immediately, it is important to examine the various possibilities and define how you want your firm to look in the next 5 to 10 yr.

At RMF Engineering, we have implemented a Toastmasters International program for engineers to develop their communication skills. We regularly host technical learning workshops and project tours as well as local community service events through each of our offices.

The fact is keeping an engineering firm sustainable and competitive is a never-ending process. The U.S. workforce will always evolve, meaning recruitment and career development will continue to evolve as well. Stay abreast of the changing trends and demands, and you will be able to lead your firm successfully into the future.

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