

BUSINESS OF HOME

BOH

ISSUE 28 | SUMMER 2023

LEAD THE WAY

*The Ultimate
Guide to Being
a Better Boss*





Lessons in **LEADERSHIP**

Savvy businesspeople are always seeking ways to save time or effort. Yet better leadership requires more of both—no shortcuts. Here are 22 ways to get the best results.

LEFT:

A tropical mural with an inky ground is an alluring backdrop for a formal dining room by Penny Francis of Eclectic Home. The designer explains how she leaned on resources offered by her payroll service to formalize her hiring process and employee retention efforts on page 58.

Mandy Riggart deploys a colorful vintage rug to enliven a neutral kitchen scheme. Behind the scenes, her all-remote team relies on Asana and open communication in their day-to-day work.





TEAM TALK

Want to make sure your instructions aren't lost in translation? Five designers share their top strategies for effective communication.

BY LIZZY REISINGER

THE SECRET SAUCE

For Gabriela Anastasio, being clear about the difference between asking and telling, or between suggesting and expecting, is “the secret sauce to working with young talent.” It’s a lesson she learned in the corporate world: Before she started her own firm, Anastasio Home, in 2021, the Litchfield County, Connecticut-based designer ran a publicity agency and worked at Rolex USA as the director of communications for its sister brand Tudor Watch, jobs that ranged from startup energy to a more traditional, formal culture. No matter the office climate, Anastasio found it beneficial to reassure her staff that when she is asking a question, she is not questioning their work ethic. “The best young employees are self-conscious, tend to take things personally and take on more responsibility than they should because they are sensitive, hardworking people,” she says. “If I can help squash any anxiety or self-doubt that might impact their workflow, I will, because it benefits my business.” Getting information from team members is a crucial part of running a business, and Anastasio’s questions are often essential for her to confirm certain information before she can move on or cross an item off her to-do list. But for a team member who doesn’t have insight into why she’s asking, it can feel more



significant. “I assure them that I am asking with no other implications to relieve them of stressful assumptions like, ‘She’s following up because she expected it to be completed by now,’ when really I’m asking because I’m about to call Steve and would like to give him an update either way,” she explains. “As a boss, you have the power to offer real-time clarity that fuels a more confident and productive team. If it goes unacknowledged that you’re asking and not questioning, it can create tension over time because the person feels like you don’t trust them, when in reality that’s not what it’s about.”

LET IT GO

“It’s easy to find fault and place blame when problems happen,” says Rachael Bangerter, a designer at Salt Lake City–based architecture and planning firm CRSA. “That’s our go-to response and an easy pattern to fall into. But I’ve found that when we’re focused on who should have done what, it limits our brains from being able to be creative, and we need to be the most creative in those scenarios to find the solutions.” Instead of

ABOVE:

Rachael Grochowski often brings elements of her yoga practice into her design work—as seen in this serene, spa-like bathroom, and in her understanding of communication challenges. To make sure her directives are clear in the workplace, Grochowski often asks her team to repeat what she said back to her.

dwelling on the problem at hand, Bangerter promotes an environment where her team can be innovative and constructive in their thinking. That wasn’t always her approach: While co-leading a project with another firm, she realized things were not falling into place because she was too critical when it came to problem-solving—something she had to change not only in that relationship but when managing her own team. “We’re afraid to make mistakes, but they are inevitable,” she says. “Yes, there will be a time to go over lessons learned and explore accountability, but in the moment, we need to be thinking at our best. That’s what opens [employees] up to generate ideas and see a different path, [which is crucial since] usually the solution is not the obvious option.”

FROM THE MAT TO THE MEETING ROOM

Outside of the office, Rachael Grochowski is an avid yogi. During her practice, she once heard a teacher say, “You only hear what you’re ready to hear.” It resonated, and it’s a mantra the New Jersey–based designer has taken with her into the workspace. “Language

is insufficient for communication because the way we understand things is based on our experience,” says Grochowski. To clear that hurdle, the designer often asks her team members to repeat what they think she said back to her for clarification—a surefire way to get everyone on the same page before the work begins. She is also a proponent of what she calls “shameless question-asking” so that staff members are never left trying to solve problems without all the necessary information. “None of us know everything,” she says. “If we create space for imperfection while supporting each other, hopefully we’ll have the best results.”

TYPE A(SANA)

For Connecticut designer Mandy Riggart, the best way to streamline her firm’s communication was to digitize it. Her all-remote team puts each of its projects into the project management software Asana, where they are broken down into different buckets—design, procurement and installation—with corresponding tasks and timelines. Riggart initially turned to the software in an attempt

to make all the relevant parts of a project visible and clear to her staff and prevent any of those tasks from falling through the cracks. “[Asana] is a really good landing spot for absolutely everything to live in one place to manage a project,” she says. “Before this, it was in a mix of emails, Google Docs and PDF downloads—all of that was a clunky process that didn’t work for a remote team.” Although her team’s communication about projects takes place within the platform, Riggat balances the tech-first approach to her workflow with an emphasis on kindness and clarity—something no amount of efficient software can replace. “Kindness is not spoken about enough in company cultures,” says Riggat, who approaches conversations

from a collaborative perspective rather than as the person who knows all of the information. “I think having clarity of expectations and approaching employees from a kind standpoint creates an environment where people enjoy working every day.”

TO THE LETTER

Any multitasker knows that it is helpful to write things down. For Sherry Shirah, this approach was instilled in her from previous jobs at technology companies, where her mentors shared their vision verbally, then backed it up with written word. Six years into establishing her own firm, the Florida- and Louisiana-based designer still uses this tactic with her own employee. “We have so

many things going on in our heads, in so many different directions, that it’s really helpful to write things down,” she says. “Whether it’s following up in an email, or going to our project workbooks and looking at the plan for the week, [documenting our work is] a big part of what we do because it’s really comprehensive.” Shirah finds comfort in being able to know she and her teammate are on the same page and that she has a point of reference when making decisions. This approach also bolsters client communication. “I find clients like when we write things down,” she says. “It’s one thing if you’re listening to them; it’s another thing if you’re listening and you’re writing it down. It’s like a reinforcement of the word.” □

BELOW:

Sherry Shirah positioned a pair of back-to-back sofas to create two distinct seating arrangements in a long living room. Whether with clients or her team, she’s a proponent of putting decisions in writing.





The Good Fight

Cultivating a foundation of trust will boost team morale, collaboration and productivity.

BY HANNAH HICKOK

What's better: a team that never argues or one that's always duking it out?

Kimberlee Gorsline, founder of the Seattle firm Kimberlee Marie Interiors, had always assumed it was the former. "I used to think no conflict meant we had a really great, harmonious team," she says. "But I realized that there actually *was* tension, but no one felt comfortable enough to say anything or knew how to say it." In the course of conversations with her staff, Gorsline learned that some had silenced their design opinions for fear of stepping on senior staff's toes, which created a dynamic of resentment and triangulation. Worst of all, much of it was playing out behind the scenes, where there was no opportunity to clear up misunderstandings. Gorsline, who had been inspired to probe deeper into team dynamics after reading Patrick Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, decided to tackle her firm's culture issue head-on.

"I hadn't set the stage with, 'If you've got a problem, let's create a situation where we feel safe [to talk it through],' she says. "The

book describes how teams build on a foundation of trust: Once you have trust, you can have conflict. Once you have conflict, you can have commitment, then accountability, and then results. I was missing commitment, where you get buy-in from your team."

Armed with worksheets from the book, Gorsline gathered her employees and had them rate the team on a scale of one to five in different areas, including conflict, and then share their responses. Before diving in, she provided guidelines and parameters for how to safely talk about tough topics. "I coach my team to assume the best intent in each other. When you're feeling frustrated, ask yourself, what assumptions am I making that maybe aren't actually true?" she says. "I also encourage an open mindset to avoid defensiveness. Saying you're curious about someone's words, rather than angry, gives the other person a chance to explain."

Giving everyone a space to voice their feelings cleared the air for a healthier team dynamic to take hold, says Gorsline. "Easing internal tensions led to external results," she says. "Once that tension was relieved, there

PHOTOGRAPHY: GORSLINE, MIRANDA ESTES, CLASEN, DAVID TSAY (INTERIOR) & VAL BAUER (PORTRAIT)



ABOVE: Kimberlee Gorsline chose crisp marine blue cabinetry and warm wood and leather hues in this Washington kitchen to frame views of the Snohomish Valley and the Cascade Mountains in the distance. In the office, her team was transformed when they abandoned a conflict-averse approach and began to embrace emotional vulnerability.

was more harmony and productivity. You have to be in a Zen-like state when you are trying to be creative—the energy was no longer going toward that [draining] interpersonal dynamic.”

Still, the process of healthy conflict isn't for the faint of heart, she cautions. “When you open up these conversations, you're going to get some honesty,” says Gorsline. “One of the designers on my team did end up resigning, because in the course of opening up, we discovered that she was unhappy in her role. It was something I couldn't change because of the business's needs. But ultimately, it was very amicable and the best decision for everybody.”

Moving forward, Gorsline is committed to keeping her firm's atmosphere a safe, positive, emotionally open one—starting with herself. “I won't ask my team to be vulnerable about something I haven't first been vulnerable on,” she says. “I'm forthcoming about my faults and struggles and how I'm processing those things. I think that naturally creates more space for them to feel like they can do the same.” □

Let your team run the show.

I don't like managing people—I'll say that out loud. I have to hire self-starters, otherwise it does not work. If I'm gone for a couple of days on an out-of-state install or a job site visit, I need a team that can make progress without me. I'm not a micromanager; everyone needs to keep going and hit the deadlines. I tell my team, “Run it like you're my boss. When design meetings have to happen, schedule time with me so that we can do the furniture plan.” At first I thought maybe that wasn't a good approach, but I've found that a lot of employees actually want to control all that because it gives them autonomy with their time.

It's also super important to have my team come in blossoming with ideas, so I've done a lot of thinking about how to foster that creativity. I check in with them a lot, asking, “How are you doing? How's your workload?” Most of the time, it's great. But sometimes it's like, “Nope, I'm bursting at the seams.” It's a small business, and we all work in the same space, so you can tell right away if someone comes in and they're edgy. For me, it's worth it to say, “Take the day and go to the beach tomorrow.” Does that person come back totally refreshed the next day? I wouldn't say totally. But it helps.

RAILI CLASEN

Raili CA Design, Corona Del Mar, California



Olive green accents in the kitchen echo the golf course views of this Pebble Beach home in California by Raili CA Design.