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Office Facility Evolves Over Time

By: Deborah Abrams Kaplan

While Louis Sullivan may have coined the term “form follows function” for his philosophy of architecture, it could also be the calling card for Rowley-Schlimgen.

As a company selling office furniture and customized office design, Rowley-Schlimgen followed its own ideology when moving the company into its new headquarters on John Nolan Drive last November. “We address the implications physical space has in an organization,” said Fred Trumm, President and CEO.

Rowley-Schlimgen decreased office space by 8,000 square feet when it moved to the single floor converted warehouse. “We’ve reduced a lot of dedicated individual space to shared community space,” Trumm stated. “The trick for us is to have our physical space reflect what we do and support what we do. We also needed to make our space support the different styles and needs of our clients.”

To create the space, the company went through a soul-searching process to determine how the company’s philosophy could be reflected in its workspace. Trumm explained that senior management started the discussion with basic issues such as “Where are we today? Where do we want to go? And what is that gap?” He recalled spending two hours discussing the first question, which was a wake-up call to him. “You can’t assume anything,” he said.

Trumm continued that it would be hard to convince clients of the need for this assessment process if Rowley-Schlimgen could not speak from experience. Clients can tour Rowley-Schlimgen as a working model of an office using this concept. He explained that Rowley-Schlimgen uses seven different styles of Steelcase furniture throughout the office, yet they blend together for a unified look.

“Our space is dictated by function, not title,” said Trumm. “Our space reflects our culture. You have to get up and move around while you work here.” In following that model, only two employees have enclosed offices. Trumm noted that these positions, in finance and human resources, require more privacy than the other functions. Even Trumm has an open office, with six foot wall panels and open space instead of a door.

Trumm explained that the idea to restructure its workspace flowed from its change several years earlier from a hierarchical corporate structure to a flattened one. The office needed to reflect the team orientation, both employees and to clients. “Before we had a two story structure, with walls and things in our way. You didn’t get the idea that this was a team environment, a fluid energetic environment,” he said.

The president explained that the organizational chart change from boxes and lines to converging circles. “Our new organizational chart was a circle, with clients, employees

and departments converging on the center, which was the client,” he said. “This helped people see that (the corporate structure) was a spherical thing, not a linear thing.”

Trumm’s goal was to increase communication among employees. Therefore Rowley-Schlimgen’s office features both open meeting areas throughout the building, with adjustable tables and stools, as well as closed conference rooms equipped with phones, computers, laptop jacks and white boards with markers. The conference rooms range in size, and can be used by any employee without reserving them. Large white-board easels are located throughout the building, with markers available.

Because dry wall is not used for individual offices, the design and placement of desks and departments can change as quickly as the furniture module can be assembled. The portable Steelcase systems include desks, wall panels and ceilings (for the conference rooms). The warehouse floor is raised, providing room underneath for cable and wiring, or quick carpet replacement. While start-up costs for this kind of system are more expensive, said Truman, the life cycle costs are lower.

The office is attractive, and the atmosphere positive. But as anyone who has been through an office move or corporate restructuring knows, change can be difficult. When Rowley-Schlimgen began changing its structure four years ago, the company had to work through employee resistance, which included hurt feelings and some not wanting increased responsibility. “It’s one thing to say we’re all empowered to do what we think is best, but that responsibility is frightening to some, and sometimes people realize that they don’t want it,” Trumm said.

He continued that “here you are empowered, but you have that responsibility that goes with it. It’s okay to make mistakes. But you must share what you’ve learned, about customers, about jobs, about what works and what doesn’t work.” This responsibility extends to an individual’s attitude and morale at Rowley-Schlimgen. “You’re responsible for your own morale,” he stated. “If you’re dissatisfied, it is your responsibility to fix it or get it fixed. I can help, and we can help, in a team structure.”

Trumm indicated that the biggest learning experience during the process was about the need to “overcommunicate.” He related that “communication doesn’t do it justice. You need to communicate 27 hours a day, reinforcing the message, providing feedback and receiving feedback. We learned more about communications in four years than many have learned in their lives.”

In promoting individual responsibility and communication, Trumm hopes to increase the value of the company for its stockholders, the employees. Since 1980, the company has operated an Employee Stock Ownership Plan, with employer-based contributions. Trumm noted that if employees feel that their work makes a difference to the bottom line, they will be more motivated to perform better to increase the value of their company stock. He added that the company believes in open book management, and the profit and loss statements are shared monthly with employees.

The process of change did not come abruptly to the furniture company. Rowley-Schlimgen opened in 1949 selling office supplies, machines and furniture on State Street. During the next 50 years, Rowley-Schlimgen moved three times within Madison, while opening a branch in Wausau and acquiring companies in DePere and Rockford. It has grown to 120 employees, with 45 of those in Madison. The company no longer sells office supplies or machines, but bills itself as offering furniture and integrated facilities solutions.

Trumm's current goal is to have Rowley-Schlimgen be a single point of contact for clients. "With the old way," Trumm explained, "companies hired movers, architects, engineers, contractors and furniture buyers. To the extent that we can narrow that for organizations, we can add value." He stated that they are forming strategic alliances with other vendors, to collaborate in servicing the clients.

Along with the Steelcase systems, Rowley-Schlimgen offers services including space planning and design, asset management, project management, move management, furniture cleaning and maintenance, and wire and cable management.

Trumm stated that companies need to change with the market to succeed. "We're continually looking to reinvent ourselves," he said. "The window of opportunity does not stay open long. Others will come in and do the same thing we do."

He anticipates changes in the future, but does not know what form they will take. "Twenty years from now I don't know what business this will be," he said. "But I know it will link facilities solutions to business ventures."