

Living By Your Values

WHY INSTITUTION BUILDING MATTERS

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Building an institution and managing its growth is a crucial part of commercial success, the importance of which is sometimes underestimated. The issue of sustainability, having an effective internal culture that operates independently of the personalities and presence of the leaders to enable an organisation to achieve its aims, is a key strategic factor for growth.

When Sharkawy & Sarhan was founded in 2006, we wanted to establish an institution that would grow future leaders and to do something different in terms of the way we functioned, driven by competent team members who had genuine ownership within the organisation. I will issue a qualification: I am not saying we have reached our goal yet. Anyone who tells you they have already succeeded in building an institution is undoubtedly mistaken. Institutional growth is an ongoing process but we have always tried to undertake it consciously: growing slowly, investing in our people and selecting the right people to invest in.

This means allowing team members of different positions and seniority to take the lead when it is appropriate. On occasion, you will find our associates playing leading roles during situations where you might not expect them to. You might find an associate giving a talk at an event, for example, while the partners are just sitting and listening.

People must be allowed the space to grow, to make mistakes and to take responsibility for the outcome of particular initiatives. This is not always a smooth process and sometimes we, the partners, need to intervene if something goes wrong. However, if the person has demonstrated their competence, commitment and skill set, it is absolutely appropriate to then give them the opportunity to make decisions. We have, for example, a wonderful young team member who has made substantial contributions to our recruitment processes. Thanks to the initiative she has shown and her ability to learn quickly and effectively, the need for my personal involvement in this area has reduced considerably.

In our hiring process, we specifically look for people who we feel share our values so that we can train them to be part of our team. We will invest as much as we can in people who share those values with us. Jim Wright, one of our Founding Partners, now retired from full-time work, still dedicates a significant amount of time to managing a comprehensive training program. Every team member has a professional development check-in meeting on a monthly basis. Everyone in the firm also has the opportunity to go on secondment to one of the magic circle firms through our secondment program. As long as we have the resources, we are committed to continuing this. Organisational growth takes place both conceptually and practically. From a conceptual perspective, it requires looking at your organisation's strategic vision and then mapping its roll-out on a practical basis. We made a very conscious decision to grow slowly because we wanted our growth to be organic and to preserve our organisational culture and values.

We don't claim to be perfect. We all make mistakes; we are human. However, part of our organisational culture is that, if we do make a mistake, we acknowledge it and we apologise for it. We engage in self-reflection and constructive criticism, so as to ensure collective accountability. We aim to always deal with one another respectfully and if anyone contravenes that, there is space to speak out. Our open door policy means that anyone in the team can address questions and feedback

to the partners.

Although for many years we did not undertake lateral hires, we recognised at a point in time that we needed to diversify. We had a team of like-minded people because of our hiring process and, as part of our own internal self-reflection, we decided two or three years ago that it was time to bring on board team members with different backgrounds and experiences. This process is very extensive, however, as we want to be sure that those we are hiring share our values even if they have not started their career with us. It is also a key organisational value of Sharkawy & Sarhan that we will not approach lawyers working in other law firms to recruit them. We only do lateral hires when a lawyer applies to or approaches us.

Looking more broadly at Egypt's legal ecosystem, it is evident that it is changing. The wave of entrepreneurship that is sweeping through Egypt and the region is being felt here too; more people are starting their own firms. Overseas law firms, such as those in the UK, are noticing that the quality of the legal service in Egypt has improved drastically in recent years. The situation is very different to 2006, when it was really rare to open one's own law firm.

Clearly, there is still a prevalent culture of hierarchy and it will take time for this to change. Frankly, if I had my way I would abolish titles but I recognise that this is a very radical approach. It is perhaps more helpful to ask ourselves how we can build a culture where, in particular situations, people are empowered to take the lead irrespective of title. In my opinion, a good approach is when you don't allocate a task to a particular person because of her seniority, but when you give the task to the person who is in the best position to take it on, and you build their skills accordingly.

We work with entrepreneurs and among the issues we have observed from an organisational point of view is the excessive focus on the personality and vision of the entrepreneur who has founded a particular initiative. This is potentially a huge hurdle. Entrepreneurs and leaders of all kinds need to think about what will happen when they are no longer around to lead their organisations, if they really want to build something sustainable. Entrepreneurs need to think about leadership in a different way; it is not just about them and what they want to achieve. If they really want to succeed in terms of positively impacting and disrupting a market, they must think about building something that goes beyond them. If their organisation falls apart when they are not around for a week, this is not a sign of success.

An entity that relies too much on the drive of one or two individuals, without giving ownership to the whole team, also ultimately contributes to a broader organisational culture of stagnation and a lack of risk taking. Ironically, entrepreneurs trying to spearhead innovation may be quashing vibrancy within their own organisations if they are not willing to invest more time and resources in building and sustaining them.

Recently we undertook an internal study, where we asked our team to think about which values we as an organisation were actually living by, and we were gratified to hear that "investing in our people" is a core value that defines us. From my perspective, this was not just a positive endorsement but an indication that we could be on the right path when it comes to building a value-based organisation whose legacy and impact will, we hope, last for many years to come.