

# Framework for future success

Consultancies can't afford to just let things happen. Only with intelligent organisational structures can creativity truly flourish, says **Jim Prior**

The late Sir John Harvey-Jones wrote, 'There are three kinds of company: those that make things happen, those that follow what happens and those that wonder what happened.'

In our industry we should take heed of this. We are here to help clients make things happen, to help them follow best practice and new ideas, but not to wonder what went wrong – management consultants do that.

Even if what gets done is more about following than leading, it is motivating for designers to be concerned with change, progress and innovation. This is a dynamic industry that is helping to shape the future every day.

It's an exciting proposition, but one that must be delivered. To drive change, evolution and growth, design consultancies must be quick and innovative in the development of their own businesses, their product and service offers, the way they engage with clients, their skill-base and structures. If not, I fear that too many will find themselves in Harvey-Jones's third group, wondering what happened, but too late.

Over the past few years at The Partners, we have evolved significantly, and the key lesson for us has been that change has to come from within. If you don't design your

organisation to deliver, then no matter how you position yourself, you'll find it impossible to meet your goals. You need an organisational structure that sets you up to succeed.

It starts with a formally articulated business plan that sets out your ambitions, your strategies and tactics. It should contain some objectives that are ambitious – if not then writing it is a waste of time. Each objective should be assigned to an individual who will take responsibility for making it happen and this, in effect, forms the basis for how you should structure your firm.

Instead of having directors managing their own clients like separate businesses, find distinct areas of responsibility for all of your senior team, aligned to the objectives in your plan, so that nobody's job looks like anyone else's. Put someone in charge of client relationships and have another take creative reputation. Tensions may result, but the effect will be less complacency, more clarity and better work. And everyone benefits from that.

To completely understand your place in the world, you need to see it from different perspectives. Non-executive directors will provide some original points of view. Choose people who have experienced change and growth in similar, but not identical circumstances to your own. Look for people who are naturally provocative and not afraid to disagree. You should always listen carefully to them (although you're never obliged to do what they say).

If you've always believed that administrative process is the enemy of creativity, then you're wrong. Your business is going nowhere if it isn't profitable and, in fact, by



managing this closely, you free up more time to invest in 'hero projects' and your ambitions will be realised. Finance and operations are key components of your business and your organisational structure should reflect that. There's nothing wrong with bean-counters, so long as someone else is in charge of growing the beans.

As you populate the structure beneath the senior team you need to look for the right people to meet the goals that you have set.

But finding the right people can be one of the biggest barriers to progress – by the time you've found them, the opportunity may have passed. To move faster you need to take some risks.

Promote a few rising stars earlier than you are comfortable with. They will almost always surprise you with the speed at which they learn and develop, and your faith in them will keep them engaged and help them contribute more. At the same time, hire people who excite you, whose skills you need more in the future than today. The challenge of keeping them occupied and inspired will force you to think differently and will help you to accelerate your plans.

One of the key paybacks of having a well-structured senior team is that the deeper down the structure you go, the more chaotic you can allow it to be – which is how great ideas and creativity really thrive.

The right organisational structure is the catalyst to making things happen. Without it, you may be left wondering where it all went wrong.

*Jim Prior is managing partner of The Partners*

## MAKING IT HAPPEN

- Include genuinely ambitious objectives in your business plan
- Give directors areas of responsibility, not client fiefdoms
- Bring on board 'provocative' non-executive directors
- Invest in administrative functions to free up time for creativity
- Promote rising stars before you think they're ready
- Hire people who excite you and try to keep them inspired