Create community: Collaboration will follow

When speaking to prospective clients about their pending assignments, we routinely hear, “We want space that is collaborative.” It’s one of the most common descriptors used when discussing a workplace vision.

While most business leaders seem to want collaboration, many presume that it is the solution to the evolving workplace. Often they aren’t sure how to achieve it. Collaboration is just one of many positive results of a grander objective.

The focus should be more on community, which is defined as “a condition of having certain attitudes and interests in common, or a group of people sharing a common understanding.” Collaboration and community have some commonalities, but creating community is a higher cause, and businesses that succeed in creating community within their organizations are the ones that will be most successful in the coming years.

We recently attended a meeting of our One Global Design partners where we listened to Sean Kelly, a millennial CEO and chief humanist for Healthy Markets. He described four recurring sociological cycles, or eras, in terms of social order (from high to low) and how we define ourselves: as individuals or part of a larger group.

In the current 100-year generation, the recurring cycles began with high social order. Strong institutions and weak individualism saw the rise of the Silent Generation. The boomers represent an “awakening” era and a shift toward individual focus. Gen X represents an “unraveling” era with an entrepreneurial mind and the highest individual focus. The rising millennials are the fourth cycle and represent a “crisis” era, or a turning back toward social order by focusing away from the individual, back toward the group.

Historically, in the fourth era there is high demand for social order. They are coming of age in a time of uncertainty and have a desire for common purpose. Their focus is on being part of a larger group versus on themselves as individuals.

In five years, millennials will constitute 50 percent of the workforce. There seems to be awareness in most businesses of this rising tide. A lot has been written about millennials, and much of that is not favorable for business engagement, commitment and continuity. We believe it doesn’t have to be that way. And that good design can help generate a committed group. If half of your workforce will be in this age group, then you should understand how to engage them. If you can create a sense of community within your organization, you are fulfilling the desire for identifying with a larger group, which leads to commitment.

So, how do you create community and reap the benefits of an engaged, committed workforce? While other factors beyond design contribute to community, design and the resulting sense of place and belonging is a major contributor. There are a few responses that rise to the top for us when designing to promote community and enhance culture.

First, it requires an acknowledgement that the workplace is becoming more social, and that’s OK. Create places (not “spaces”) that function for both work and social interaction. Work is an active part of social life.

Second, the line between work and home is blurring. Create comfort in the workplace. Third, there is less space dedicated to individuals and more allocated to group spaces. There is also a trend toward visibility. It is important to “see and be seen.”

Lastly, there is a desire for variety in the daily work experience that requires mobility. Mobility, which requires technology integration, promotes interaction. Up to 80 percent of interaction may be unplanned. Design destinations and create surprise and opportunities for collision and interaction.

Those businesses that plan well now for the rising “We Generation” will be the most successful in the next 25 years.

“It’s not good design that is expensive. Mediocrity is what’s expensive.” said J. Irwin Miller. Cummins’ former CEO and patron of modern architecture.

Over the lifecycle of a building or lease, for most businesses the largest expense is people. When people enjoy their daily experience, feel a part of something larger and are committed to the mission, you’ll be amazed at the outcome. By creating community, collaboration will follow.