THE**SANDBOX**BLOG

A taste of our own medicine (aka: Good walls make good teams)

April Greene — April 23, 2015

Learning by doing is one of Pilot Projects' favorite activities, and one we use in our work all the time. Our signature participatory design tool, the Sandbox, is perhaps the best example.

The Sandbox brings as many of a design project's stakeholders as possible to the table—literally—to work out their goals and ideas together using hands-on, physical models. It's extremely effective, efficient, and fun, and we use it with the majority of our clients.

Recently, we wondered how we might turn the mirror on ourselves and try using such a participatory design process in our own office space and with our own team. (Our clients benefit from it, so why couldn't we?!) But usually, clients call us when they have a design problem to solve... What problem could we choose to tackle?

Luckily (?), one came immediately to mind.

Staff drew and discussed (with matching hats!)

While open offices have been all the rage for a while, we at Pilot Projects don't subscribe to trends—we believe the best solutions is are tailor-made to the problems they solve. So, an open office might work great for some companies, not for others. For us, it wasn't working so well.

Though we enjoy a sunny and homey office space in a vibrant neighborhood, it's just one big room, so it's tough for any of us to have an in-depth conversation with a client, take an important personal call, or just work with peace and quiet. In our case, it seemed that a privacy wall might actually make us better neighbors. (And we knew we'd have fun building it ourselves. What could make for better "team building" at Pilot Projects?)

But in the name of being good participatory practitioners, we didn't just have C-Suite draft a plan and start building. We set aside one full workday last month and got all of Pilot Projects' staff and regular contributors

Office before (with wall ideas on the whiteboard)

around a table for a few hours to voice ideas, draw diagrams, and gesticulate our way to a plan we could all agree on.

Office after! (before paint and door installation)
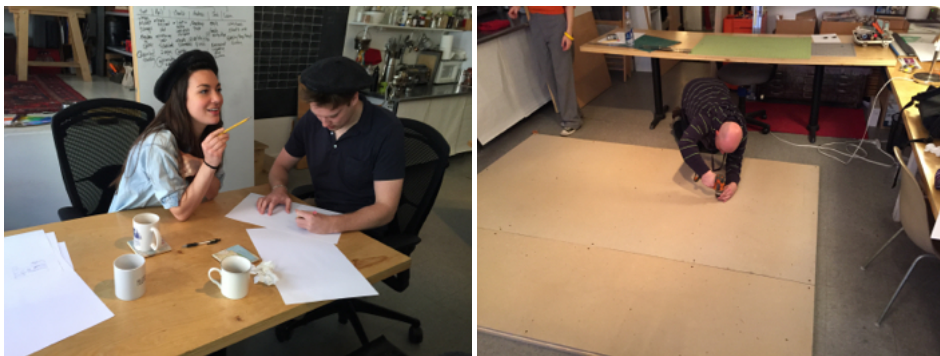
Discussing, drawing, building

With the help of creativity coach Ken Kinard, who facilitated the day, we first discussed what the wall would mean to us. Would it create a conference room of sorts, and if so, would we need to institute a system for reserving it? Would we be bothered if the amount of sunlight that could reach the rest of the office was reduced? Though we all agreed it would be good for practicality's sake, was there a chance the wall could change our team dynamic in a negative way?

Then, we discussed the design and construction. Should the wall be built between two windows, or to the side of them? How should we soundproof it? What color should it be? Where should the door to this new space be placed?

By the end, everyone's opinions had been heard. Not everyone got just what they wanted (with so many perspectives, that wouldn't have been possible!), but everyone did understand and "sign off" on the design before any sawing or painting began.

When we did start construction, we found ourselves using many of the same participatory tactics to do the actual work. Whether it was asking a more experienced carpenter for help using a new tool or crowdsourcing game-time decisions about screw placement, we all shared our ideas and skills to get the job done.

A wall from vision to reality

So what did we gain from using a participatory design process in our own work, with our own staff? Well, we...

- Were glad to see some of Pilot Projects' values in action. For example, "excellent craftsmanship" was exercised when we took the time to cut some of our plywood with a Japanese "pull" saw instead of an American "push" saw to produce smoother lines.

- Saw that everyone, no matter what background they had in design or what they currently do at Pilot Projects, had thoughtful and relevant suggestions and questions. For example, our operations director wondered if there should be a window in the wall, for visual interest and to let light in. Though we eventually decided against it, the designers liked the idea!

- Appreciated the planning and building day not only for the opportunity it gave us to build something meaningful together that affects the space we share, but also for the time it gave us to get to know each other's working styles, opinions, and strengths in ways we don't usually see in the 9-to-5.

For us, this planning and building day drove home the point that participatory processes result in designs everyone can feel good about, because everyone has a say. It also showed us first-hand that such exercises also go a long way toward strengthening relationships within teams—even if you're literally building walls between them.

Painted and functioning!

Tags: collaborative design, workspace design, nyc, sandbox

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