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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 130: ANDREA SARATE – WORKPLACE STRATEGY

Ken White

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, this is Leadership & Business. The podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. Your office or physical workspace. It has an effect on your attitude, your outlook, and your performance. That's why companies and organizations turn to workplace strategists to help them design a space or facility that promotes excellence, collaboration, and wellness. Andrea Sarate is the Senior Director of Workplace Strategy for Colliers International, a commercial real estate brokerage firm. For 10 years, she's helped organizations get the most out of their physical space. She joins us on the podcast today to talk about workplace strategy, how it ties to productivity, and how the right work environment can lead to happy employees and a healthy bottom line. Here's our conversation with Andrea Sarate.

Ken White

Andrea, thank you very much for joining us. A real pleasure to have you on the podcast.

Andrea Sarate

I'm so thrilled to be here. It's an honor. Thank you so much.

Ken White

You're the first Executive MBA student, current student to be on the podcast. That's great.

Andrea Sarate

Thank you.

Ken White

Yeah, yeah.

Andrea Sarate

I hope I represent my class well.

Ken White

And I'm sure they will tell you. Won't they?

Andrea Sarate

Oh, they will.

Ken White

You have one heck of a class. One thing you and I have in common is on a regular basis we get to walk into Miller Hall, the home of the business school here at William & Mary. And as someone who's been doing that every day for six years, every day I walk in, I just say, wow. I mean, it has an effect on everything. Does that sort of wrap up what you do? Is that what companies are trying to do, and organizations are trying to do, make people feel good by the physicalness of the place?

Andrea Sarate

They are starting to, and that's what is making being a workplace strategist so exciting right now is that people have realized that workplace can be a wonderful tool to really positively impact business. And really help with that attraction and retention of top talent, the workplace. Glassdoor.com did a survey workplaces and the top three reasons that people either like or dislike their work environment.

Ken White

Yeah.

Andrea Sarate

And their job.

Ken White

So what you do? You are a workplace strategist.

Andrea Sarate

I am.

Ken White

What does that entail?

Andrea Sarate

It entails the application of research and experience, understanding how people work. What do they need to work? What are their tools that they need and technology they need so that they can do their best work? My primary goal is to help companies create environments to enable their people to do great things.

Ken White

How does one become a workplace strategist?

Andrea Sarate

Well, actually, that's a wonderful question because everyone comes to it differently. I myself am an anthropologist. So for the liberal arts majors out there, yes, anthropologists do get jobs in Corporate America. But a lot of people come through it as either facility planners and managers, or designers, interior designers, and architects. Anyone that has an interest in how the workplace is created can eventually become a workplace strategist.

Ken White

What are some of the skills required?

Andrea Sarate

Patience, a lot of listening. And I really think the most important one is a just innate deep curiosity about people. Who are they? What do they want? How do they work? And importantly, especially for me as an anthropologist, what is the cultural goals that you're trying to set for your company? You can influence culture. You can nudge it with a workplace. You can't build it or change it or create it, but you can kind of push it along. So if you want to improve the culture of your company or shift it a little bit, taking it to the workplace is a great place to start.

Ken White

And so what's the process like? Can you take us through?

Andrea Sarate

Sure.

Ken White

Is there a process that you generally put into place, or does it vary?

Andrea Sarate

There is, it is always tailored to the client, which is another reason I like the work is every client is different. Even clients I've worked with for several years as their needs and their

people evolve and change over time, I had the opportunity to do more in different sites. For example, you spending time in Florida or in Texas? I like the Texas example best. Dallas and Fort Worth are 45 minutes apart, and they are so different culturally.

Ken White

How about that.

Andrea Sarate

So a law firm, for example, has an office in Dallas will create a very different environment than the law firm office in Fort Worth, even though it's the same organization. And so looking at that, the first thing I always want to find out is what's important to you. I would like to ask leadership, what keeps you up at night? And the answer is resoundingly getting the right people and helping make sure I keep them and give them what they need.

Ken White

Yeah.

Andrea Sarate

And the workplace is such a great tool to help impact that. So the first is asking a lot of questions. Finding out what your goals are and then also looking, observing. I spend a lot of time in my client sites watching how they work, seeing what spaces they have, what they don't. A lot of times I'm working with people, for example, when they're relocating. Their lease is up, or they need to build a new headquarters because they've outgrown the one that they have. And I'll come in and help them figure out what does that space need to be like in the future. But you know that takes a while.

Ken White

Yeah.

Andrea Sarate

That might take a year and a half, two years. So part of what I love to do is also look at the existing space and figure out what are the missed opportunities you have right now. Since you're not waiting for the new building to make improvements, you can have some impacts. Now, my own office, I work for Colliers International in Dallas. We've got some wonderful space that no one is using. So the operations manager and I were looking at floor plans yesterday and making plans to remove some equipment and put up some walls and make little phone rooms.

Ken White

Yeah.

Andrea Sarate

For the brokers, which is going to be exciting.

Ken White

So you talk to the leadership. What about the folks who work there?

Andrea Sarate

Absolutely. I try.

Ken White

And how do you do that?

Andrea Sarate

I do focus groups and interviews. We start with a survey, so we get quantitative data about the workplace. But then I also do focus groups and interviews to get that qualitative data, and I always divide individual contributors from the people, managers from leadership. Because what I found over time is generally if your boss is in the room, you'll give a very different answer than if your boss is not in the room.

Ken White

Right.

Andrea Sarate

Still might be a good answer, but it's best to create that candid opportunity to speak.

Ken White

What contributes to a good workplace design? How do you know you're on the right path?

Andrea Sarate

Well, there's always the issue of capacity, but most importantly, and this is the big issue that a lot of companies are figuring out today is you need a diversity of spaces. You need lots of different kinds of spaces. We don't just sit knowledge workers or what we like to call judgment workers. We don't just sit in one place doing one thing all day long. We get up. We move. We go to meetings. We interact with people both physically and then via the web. Now we have colleagues in other places. Are we providing the right kinds of spaces to support all of those activities throughout the day? Thinking about human well-being is incredibly important. We spend a lot of time at work. It needs to not be terrible while we're there. We also want to make sure that we're connecting people. For example,

do we have a bunch of tiny little refuel stations with a coffee pot and a tiny little fridge, and everybody eats at their desk? Or do we create a cafe that people can go sit in and have their meetings there when it's not just lunch? You have their one on ones and have those what we like to call social collisions, so I think that sounds a little violent. But those social moments that are the social glue that really holds all of us together and really is what makes a team makes a teamwork.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Andrea Sarate in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at William & Mary's School of Business. If you're looking to raise your game and take your career to the next level. The Center for Corporate Education offers non-degree programs that help you become a more effective professional. Topics include business analytics, communication, leadership, strategy, accounting, and more. The programs are taught by William & Mary's MBA faculty. The faculty ranked number one in the nation by Bloomberg Businessweek. To learn more, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with workplace strategist Andrea Sarate.

Ken White

When you think of building you've worked on or a facility, you know that you think, man, that's just that was an A-plus. Can you give an example of why it was so good? What worked?

Andrea Sarate

Oh, gosh. Yeah, I built an office in Hong Kong, did it all via headset and Skype, which was pretty fun.

Ken White

Wow, yeah.

Andrea Sarate

I was hoping to go but didn't get to, that was okay. And what was so great is they had been in kind of rented office space. It was super generic and didn't have anything to do with the company or the people. It was just bland space they were sitting in. The new office not only represented the brand of the company, but we engaged all the employees to come up with the names for all the conference rooms. Think about their decorations like what did they want at their desks to represent themselves and their family, and the office to personalize it a little bit, own it. And we also engaged a feng shui consultant because it was in Hong Kong, and we wanted to respect the culture there.

Ken White

Hmm-mmm.

Andrea Sarate

So I think it's important. Any office to be really successful has to be really thoughtfully considered of place. What you need in Hong Kong versus what you need in Stockholm. We built an office in Boulder, and you have to give them storage for all their mountain bikes.

Ken White

Yeah.

Andrea Sarate

Because they do that in Boulder.

Ken White

Yeah.

Andrea Sarate

In Stockholm, we had to give this huge locker room a shower facility. Because to take advantage of the limited daylight, they all go out at lunch and spend two or three hours, you know, skiing or cross-country skiing or whatever. And they all come shower and then they work at night once its dark again. That's not how they work in Virginia, for example.

Ken White

Right, yeah. Can you tie a good design to productivity? Did you see results?

Andrea Sarate

You can. You can. Typically, it's tricky because a lot of those productivity measures are owned by H.R., you know, performance reviews and evaluations. However, in the times that we've been able to work with H.R. as a partner, we can see engagement scores increasing after a workplace project. That's also why post-occupancy survey is just as important as finding out what needs to be fixed ahead of time because then you can measure your success.

Ken White

So after they're in the facility for a while, ask how's it going? What if the answer is that, not great? You can obviously make some changes, right.

Andrea Sarate

Exactly.

Ken White

And tweak things.

Andrea Sarate

And you should. And that's the other important piece about workplace strategy and why I love my job. It's never-ending. You know, our tools and technology and how we work is changing all of the time. So you should always assume that with every workplace project, you're going to hopefully get 90 percent right and build and know that there's gonna be changing. Because what will happen is people will get in the new space and have new opportunities to work differently.

Ken White

Yeah.

Andrea Sarate

And then they will, and then their needs will change.

Ken White

Yeah.

Andrea Sarate

So you're always checking in and working on it. If it's if you're doing it right.

Ken White

Any parallels with generations and age of workers, younger workers like this, older workers like that?

Andrea Sarate

You know, that's a wonderful topic for discussion on LinkedIn these days, is the generations in the workplace. And I can say that it seems to be largely about life stage. Whether or not you're the demands of your family cycle, you know, are you going to get kids from school or daycare or pick mom or dad up from senior care? Those kinds of things, having that flexibility that again gets back to well-being. Are we addressing your needs as a person? Do our policies reflect that? And so that's really more of a policy issue, but it's absolutely about talent and people. And generally, as long as you're taking account that people have lives and other obligations. You'll be in good shape.

Ken White

We visit so many organizations here in the business school, and so many of them have a bunch of cubicles.

Andrea Sarate

Yes.

Ken White

I can't imagine people love those. What's the thinking on that? Sometimes we have to have them, right?

Andrea Sarate

Mmm-mmm

Ken White

What are they good? Are they bad? Do we try to fix them? What's your feeling?

Andrea Sarate

Well, you know, what's funny about that is some people love their cubicles. And if you were to take them away, they would just flip out.

Ken White

Yeah.

Andrea Sarate

Cubicles provide some acoustic barriers. That's actually acoustic fabric that's in there or acoustic material in the cubicle. So that provides some assistance. But most people like to tack up personal items

Ken White

Right.

Andrea Sarate

And really customize their space, and having all those walls of your cubicle can let you do that. The biggest issue is really about having an ergonomic workspace that is supporting your physical self. So having adjustable height tables, ergonomic task seating, and importantly, individual task lighting. Not everyone sees the same way, and having a bunch of fluorescent lights in the room may not be the right level of brightness for all the different kinds of people you have in your space. So giving everyone a task light can go a long ways to helping people be productive.

Ken White

How about stand up, sit down? How much of that do you see and what are companies and organizations doing?

Andrea Sarate

Well, really, adjustable height work surfaces should be standard. And the idea is that the human body was meant to move. It's not good to stand all day. Just good as it's not good to sit all day. The idea, generally speaking, guidelines are that you want to be standing at least 15 minutes out of every hour since you have 2 hours total by the time you get through a regular workday. I like to call it the prairie dog effect. Like after lunch, you'll see one person stand, and then boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, everyone else will start. They will be like, oh, right, my desk moves; I should get up. And so when you first implement adjustable height desking, you need to recruit your standing leaders, or you can put timers either in your outlook, your calendaring system. Or there's some systems where the desk itself will tell you; hey Andrea, you've been sitting for a couple hours time to get up.

Ken White

Interesting.

Andrea Sarate

A lot of options for that.

Ken White

I've seen some conference rooms that have solid walls, some glass, some frosted glass, just considering laws and culture. What what's the way to go at this point?

Andrea Sarate

Typically, glass is always welcome because you want the light from the windows to people to penetrate the conference room. But having that frosted band in the middle does allow for privacy because there are times if you're putting your financials. You don't necessarily, or maybe it's your performance scales.

Ken White

Sure.

Andrea Sarate

You don't want to have those. You want to be able to have confidential materials. So by having that, being thoughtful about confidentiality, having that be an option is a great

thing. There are also some products that have the current, and there's a particulate sandwich within the glass. You can flick a switch, and it will go opaque.

Ken White

Nice, nice.

Andrea Sarate

That's pretty fun

Ken White

Temperature. It's fun in this building where we work. Everyone wants a different temperature. How in the world do you deal with that?

Andrea Sarate

It's a lot of negotiating. There are some technological systems that you can have an app, and you can control what your temperature is. That gets really challenging from facilities management perspective. If everybody is messing with the thermostat, facility managers hate that. So typically, it's about balancing. Usually, if there are hot and cold spots, it's probably been a few years since your HVAC system was balanced, and you need to come back in and check them.

Ken White

If you have a crystal ball, what's coming down the pike? What's the next big thing in the next 5, 10 years that we'll see in your world and those of us who work in buildings that we'll see?

Andrea Sarate

I think the greatest challenge we are still facing is telepresence. How are we going to solve the issue of the fact that our team members are all somewhere else? I'm my team is all located all over the U.S. So we have we use Microsoft Teams, for example. We all get on camera, and we talk and have our team catch-ups that way. But it is a little awkward. Most companies can have a lot of talent. They may have entire teams of software engineers, you know, in some other country in another time zone. How are you including them, when you're having those brainstorming sessions and your whiteboarding and collaborating? We haven't found a way to do that yet, well. There's a lot, but there are a lot of really smart people working on it. So I think that'll be the next thing.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Andrea Sarate. And that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the

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