

Built to Last

Published on Nov 02, 2018 by Niko Canner



Twenty years ago, Marc Feigen, Jon Katzenbach and I founded Katzenbach Partners, a firm focused on breakthrough organizational performance. We grew the firm organically, adding an office in Houston led by Kenny Kurtzman, an office in Chicago led first by John Parker and then by Tom Nodine, and an office in San Francisco led by Zia Khan. In 2009, we sold the firm to Booz & Company. It's now been almost as long since the sale as the number of years the firm was in active operation. Nevertheless, over the weekend, something approaching a third of the 350 people who ever worked at Katzenbach Partners gathered for a crowdfunded event in New York City.

Alumni coming from Houston, the West Coast, even Europe described the incredulous looks they received as they explained they were paying their own way in order to spend the weekend with people with whom they had worked, perhaps over the course of a few years in their early twenties, at a consulting firm that closed its doors almost a decade back. And yet looking back on what the firm was like and what it meant, it all makes sense.

We didn't write down a set of stated values until well into the process of building Katzenbach Partners, but when we did, in addition to "clear and lasting client impact," a value to which all similar firms subscribe, we stated as our bedrock commitments "unique and formative experience" and "different kind of firm." Perhaps more than anything, Katzenbach Partners became a place where young people could learn and do extraordinary things. We recruited our first undergraduate "class" when the firm was two, and by the time we were five, we had more than twenty percent of the Harvard and Yale classes applying to what was by then a fifty-person firm, more than the number who applied to medical school those years. Kristen Clemmer, who led recruiting, made the work of going on campus each year a vehicle for shaping the culture of the firm, not only through the selection decisions themselves, but through careful attention to how we told the firm's story, made our interviews true dialogues with learning on both sides, turned talented people down gracefully and helped, in a consultative way, the couple percent who emerged with offers to weigh

our opportunity against their many other opportunities. We lacked the resources, the alumni networks and the visible brand of our main competitors, freely acknowledged these gaps, and tried to help each of the exceptional people to whom we made offers imagine what kind of experience they'd have with us and to reflect on how that experience could connect to their goals and aspirations.

Unusual paths grew from this soil. Deepti Doshi, for instance, who joined Katzenbach Partners out of Wharton's undergraduate program, helped me develop the Acumen Fellows program as a pro bono project and then went in house at Acumen to run the program. This led her on a path of non-profit entrepreneurship, bringing the Escuela Nueva teaching method from Colombia to India and then launching Haiyya, an organization that combined grassroots community organizing with technology and data to run neighborhood-based campaigns in Mumbai. She recently launched Facebook's Community Leadership Program.

The pressure to live up to the promise of our values made us better. It sparked a sense of daring in what we did with clients. Part of the magic of our work was seeking out a deep understanding of what was happening at the front lines of a client's organization and then connecting that ground reality to the strategic agenda at the top. When we began working with T-Mobile USA on retail transformation, for instance, we spent time with the best store managers trying to understand what made them tick and what a store of the future would need to be to channel the superpowers they brought to their work. Before we presented any recommendations, we developed a comic strip that captured the best of what we were seeing on the front lines, which the CEO decided to distribute to every US employee.

Feedback was intense. Twice a year, we'd deliver performance reviews that rather than being checklists were written in long form, like essays reflecting on the development and contributions of each member of the firm. One of the most important things we did was to ensure that as reviewers gathered feedback from each team member who had worked closely with a given individual, they would always ask whether this feedback had been discussed directly with the person in question. We felt strongly that performance assessments should always be discussed in the moment and at the conclusion of a project, so that the firm's reviews could be a time for synthesis and reflection. This was an enormously time-consuming process, and twice a year, Shanti Nayak, as Head of People, and I as Managing Partner would each spend almost an entire week sitting in working sessions with the reviewers of different cohorts in the firm discussing the picture of how each and every individual was developing. The result of all this was that every single individual felt that the firm truly understood and cared about his or her development, and that a deeply nuanced view of how individuals could grow informed staffing, mentoring and participation in developing new opportunities, the lifeblood of any consulting firm. We recognized that people with such diverse interests would often come to Katzenbach Partners, learn a set of foundational skills and then take their careers in different directions. As described in this post on [How to Retain Talent and How to Lose People the Right Way](#), one of the core metrics by which we publicly evaluated ourselves was the quality of dialogues we had about career paths with any individual who made the decision to leave, and whether we followed through on our commitments to help them explore on the outside as well as find the most compelling opportunities on the inside.

In this environment, people did amazing work and developed at a faster rate than larger consulting

firms would have thought possible. Matt Anderson, for instance, joined Katzenbach Partners a few years out of college in 2004, initially in a junior role. Within a short period of time, he was Kenny's right-hand man in driving work at some of the firm's largest clients. The two of them and their teams produced some of the most creative strategy work I've ever seen. This included an early application of the concept of OODA loops from aerial warfare to make speed a competitive advantage, and a model for using scenario planning to allocate capital better under conditions of uncertainty. When we sold Katzenbach Partners to Booz, Matt had demonstrated all the capabilities and results required to be made a partner - achieving in five short years a level of capability that would take even the highest performers in a typical strategy firm a decade to reach. Matt is now President and Chief Digital Officer at Arrow Electronics, a \$20B distributor of technology products. People with very different strengths and backgrounds achieved impressive velocities of development in very different ways. Where Matt is intensely analytical and entrepreneurial, Traci Entel, who joined the firm as a junior associate in its first year, was a natural advisor who stood out from the beginning on the dimensions of empathy, judgment and managerial ability. She played the critical leadership role with me at Pfizer, for many years Katzenbach Partners' largest client, and became head of our New York office and at Booz & Company became the firm's Chief of Human Resources, named to the global executive committee when she was still in her mid thirties. She's now a Managing Director at BlackRock.

Where many consulting firms have a high-status "outside" culture of consultants focused on winning and serving clients, and an "inside" culture focused on management and operations that's treated as peripheral to the firm's real work, we always aimed to have a single culture, with firm members in all kinds of roles building an institution together. Amrita Bhandari briefly played a role as my assistant when she was right out of college, became involved in the firm's financial management, moved into serving clients, and while she was still in her mid-twenties became the firm's CFO and one of the firm's most important leaders. She's since become CFO and then head of Business Development for Acumen. Kyle Ewalt temped for us helping out around the office while he was making ends meet after arriving in New York from the Berklee College of Music - one of many artists and performers who worked at Katzenbach Partners over the years in all kinds of roles. His talent for creating a supportive and beautiful workplace experience meant he quickly became office manager, won the firm's values award and delivered an iconic performance of "I'm Bringing Katzen Back" in a firm offsite video every alum remembers. After the sale of Katzenbach Partners to Booz, Kyle grew into the role managing the New York office for Booz and, when PwC acquired Booz, played a role connecting office managers around the world to help support the integration.

For all of our energy, optimism and talent, we went through early challenges in making the firm an expression of the best of what we knew about organization. At a critical stage about five years in, we invited Katzenbach Partners alum Amy Gallo and collaborator Jessica Korn (now Liebowitz) to consult to us. They interviewed every member of the firm and wrote a report that held up a difficult mirror about the ways in which we were falling short of our own ideals.

We learned from their work as we'd have wanted our clients to learn from us. We articulated management standards and created disciplines for how teams engage in dialogue before, during and after projects about goals for the work; learnings; personal hopes, concerns and needs; and how to work together. We invested in building a culture where upward feedback was expected, and used the formal mechanism of 360s for partners and principals to reinforce the even more important

informal norm of ensuring that feedback would flow in all directions in the day-to-day process of reflecting on our work. Maggie van de Griend, a principal who led the firm's training function alongside her work building and leading clients, developed practice fields for consultants to learn the skills of navigating difficult conversations effectively, which were equally foundational to the work of advising and to the art of collaboration in teams.

We'd internalized these ways of being, in a way that made us ready to preserve and deepen our culture in the crucible of harder times. After years of steady 25 to 30 percent organic growth, funded out of operating profits, in 2007 we planned for a similar growth rate, stumbled, and failed to grow. In April 2008, we laid off almost 15 percent of our team. We'd always made tough decisions about performance, but this was the first time we'd had to cut people we wanted to keep because of weakness in our business. I remember how that evening, a Friday, dozens of current and former firm members gathered informally in a bar around the corner from our office in New York's Flatiron district, just because they wanted to be together. There were people who had long since moved on to other opportunities, people we'd cut that morning and people who would be taking the firm forward. Perhaps at that moment more than any other, it was intensely, vividly apparent that we'd built something lasting.

Looking back on it now, it is clear that the firm we created together was not simply a consulting firm but an unusual kind of vehicle for postgraduate education in the liberal arts, in which people learned - together and with their clients - to solve problems at the frontiers of their fields and in the process developed ways of thinking and ways of being they took with them into later life. Some of the "graduates" of this institution have become luminary professors in the same field: Marc built his own firm, Feigen Advisors, and has become one of the world's premier advisors to CEOs and their successors, to a degree none of us achieved during our time building Katzenbach Partners; Rusty O'Kelley leads Russell Reynolds' global practice advising boards; Maggie has built her own successful firm, Sokrates Partners, with the "k" an homage to Katzenbach Partners; and "Katz" himself has a new book, [The Critical Few](#), co-authored with alumna Gretchen Anderson, which further advances the thinking on culture and leadership that represented such an important strand of our work at the firm. That particular path of advising corporations was, in the end, no more central to what we were doing together than the paths of those who drew on the school of this experience to practice emergency medicine, build networks of charter schools, lead foundations, write fantasy novels for young adults, and found companies in fields from behavioral health to making offshore data entry a vehicle for lifting people out of poverty.

Our years together building Katzenbach Partners - a decade for some of us, a couple of years for others - helped each of us to become who we are. This weekend's gathering, so beautifully assembled and led by Maggie and by Mollie Toth, helped us each to see ourselves more clearly in one another's light, to celebrate what we experienced together, and to look ahead, no longer as a firm, but still as a community.

** *Photo by Lauren Mehnert Asnis*