

BUSINESS OF HOME

BOH

ISSUE 23 | SPRING 2022

From the Ground Up

A fresh look
at today's growth
opportunities



Growing Pains

For all of the upsides of growth, there's a side effect that doesn't get talked about enough: how emotionally challenging it can be for the principal at the helm. Whether the change comes fast or slow, adding a new team member (or 20) indelibly changes a firm, and the person running it. Seven designers at different stages of staffing up share how they think about hiring, and how they've adjusted to their own changing role within the firm.

BY KAITLIN PETERSEN





The Dreamer

After years of compromising his vision by working for someone else, Nile Johnson set himself free and founded his Philadelphia-based firm. Now he's embracing the idea that his dream needs a team.

When you started your firm, did you have plans to grow the business beyond yourself?

I didn't have any thoughts about it. I was in a position where I just did not want to work for anyone else anymore. Nobody got it the way that I wanted them to get it, or the way I wanted to do it. I was like, "You know what? The best thing I can do is do it myself."

When did that start to change?

The decision to hire came out of scarcity and desperation. I never really felt like I was ready to do it, and then suddenly I was backed into a corner and desperately needed help. I was holding onto responsibilities and roles based on the belief that either I couldn't afford anybody, or that nobody else could do it the way that I wanted to do it. I now know that a lot of that is my limiting beliefs—I wouldn't allow myself to dream bigger.

For years, I relied on interns. But even back then, one of my interns said to me, "It's really hard for you to do what you're supposed to do because you are stuck here doing what you need to do." In that moment, I knew she was right, but I never moved. I got caught up feeling like I wasn't worthy, and I just kept doing things myself.

What kind of team do you have today?

Right now, it's just me and a junior designer, and I'm in the middle of second-round interviews to replace a project coordinator who left. It's funny timing to talk about all of this because last night I realized that what I thought would be one position should actually be two or three.

How did that happen?

I went into it thinking we'd get a new project coordinator and I'd go back to what I was doing. Reflecting on what my needs are after the first round of interviews, I felt like three candidates were surfacing. I know I'm going to hire at least two, and I've realized that I need three.



I had to say to myself, 'Can you support what it is that you're trying to do at the level that you're doing it now?' And the answer was no.

NILE JOHNSON



Nile Johnson combined a series of structured silhouettes for this sleek showhouse space designed with the ultimate luxury in mind: time to rest, relax and think.

What got you thinking differently?

Every candidate I talked to asked about the team. It wasn't just about how many people I had working for me currently—they wanted to know what my future goals were, and about my vision. That has never happened in interviews for me in the past, and it made me think.

Before, my project coordinator had been working part-time for me and also for another firm. But at one point I asked her, "Just for some insight, can you help me understand what it is that you're doing at the other firm?" The job description was very similar to what she had been doing for me—plus simple bookkeeping. I was so surprised. It had never occurred to me to ask her to do that for me, or that I could even have someone who could tick both the project management and bookkeeping boxes. What would have happened if I had really let her do the job she was capable of but that I was afraid to give her? She could have taken on more responsibility, her hours could have grown—maybe she could have come on full-time, and maybe she would have stayed at the firm. Hearing that helped me get out of my own head and stop thinking that I have to do everything myself.

Sometimes I have to take it to a place that's so far out—I have to say to myself, "Let's think about Ralph Lauren." When you'd go to the Ralph Lauren section of a department store back in the day, everything was so perfectly branded. Now, did he go to every Macy's and fold every Ralph Lauren sweater and position the stands so it had that Ralph Lauren look? No, it's branded and it's taught. He had to teach someone his brand, and then that person had to teach someone else. I have to tell myself all the time, "Nile, it's possible. And the only thing standing in the way of that right now is you."

How do you get out of your own way in practice?

It's not an overnight thing. I had a friend who once sent me this really cool document that said, "Delegate or die." It listed everything—it was at least 13 pages of small print with all the different business-related tasks like management, social media, and so on. It wasn't for design specifically, but a lot of them crossed over. There were three columns: I have to do this, Someone else could probably do this and Someone else definitely can do this. It's very interesting to go through that and check things off. This was back in 2015 or 2016, which tells you that I knew years ago that I needed to give up responsibility and grow. But it's not so much the doing, it's the believing and the thinking that gets in the way.

How are you thinking about it now, as you turn this one job into several?

I had to start considering some of my clients' needs, even if they were needs that I didn't personally want to deal with. I really do need someone who is grounded in project coordination, very detailed and process driven, who can offer up deliverables and create timelines. I'm seeing that need surface again and again, and I know I need someone who can support it. And then as the projects grow, the ordering process grows with it. With the amount of detail that I put into projects, where we could have more than 50 different vendors in one room, I need somebody to support that. Those were the two things that came up for me after the first round of interviews—the conversations with those candidate sparked that for me. So even if they all tank the second round and none of them gets hired, I still know what I need.

The third candidate is someone who's more design focused. I always thought that I didn't need somebody who wants to be a designer—but then I realized that I do, because there is a level of project that I still take on that maybe I don't need to be completely involved in, or where I could be managing at a high level and have somebody to help with the details. It actually made me think of an interview you did a few years ago [as part of the 50 States Project series online] with two designers [Miranda Cullen and Devon Tobin] in Colorado, where they talked about their setup: They had their full-service firm, Duet Design Group, and then they had another business, Inside Stories, for their team to take on smaller jobs. They said, in essence, "We like being able to take on these smaller jobs, but we also recognize that we can't personally be involved because our level of detail and how involved we like to be in a project really only serves us at a higher-end level." That was an epiphany for me, and it helped me recognize that several different beliefs could coexist. I believe I should be compensated properly, I believe that my projects should be executed at this level, and I believe that I can only do projects executed at this level and be involved in them at the detail that I want to be and make it fair to the client and me if it's X amount of dollars. But I also love these smaller projects, and I want to be involved in these projects in some way, but I need support for that. It was very eye-opening for me.

When you're hiring, what is the second-round interview like?

The first round of questions is basic: Tell me about your background. What type of management style do you prefer? What

are your salary requirements? In the second interview, I start with questions that dig a little bit deeper: What is the most difficult customer experience you have had? What has been the most rewarding professional experience in your career? And then the last questions I ask are more about the person: What is your spiritual practice—not in terms of religion, but what is your relationship with yourself? How do you keep yourself centered? What's something that's true that almost no one agrees with you on?

I also ask, What would you do in the event of a zombie apocalypse? You're laughing, but it's a good question. I once had a front-runner and when I got to those questions, she was like, "That's a weird question." And I knew it wouldn't be a fit. It was like, "OK, nope. Thank you for your time."

Is there a number-crunching phase to make sure three new hires will fit into your budget?

That's the part that makes my palms sweat. I crunched the numbers and I was like, "Wow, that's a whole lot I need to bring in every month if I'm going to have a team of this size." But then I had to accept and own that. It's scary, but it's scary because I care about the people I'm hiring. That's a good thing. And if I look at the projects that I was taking in 2012 and 2013 versus the projects I'm taking now, have they expanded and grown? Yes, they have. Has my firm risen to meet where I am now? I had to say to myself, "Can you support what it is that you're trying to do at the level that you're doing it now?" And the answer was no.

Needing a team to support the way you work now is so poignant—and it can sneak up on you! That happened to me too, and my first instinct was that it was some sort of personal shortcoming, rather than realizing that the circumstances I was operating in had changed.

It's so easy to blame yourself. In terms of my creative process I had somebody say to me, "The time you need is the time you need." That's it. That's just point blank, period. If you need eight weeks, then you need eight weeks. If you need 12 weeks, then you need 12 weeks. The team you need to support your work should be the same.

What are you envisioning for the size and shape your firm could take?

I know that I don't want a huge empire of a firm, because that's just not how I operate in daily life. I like intimate relationships. But I know the level of work that I want to do, too. I see there being

about seven of us someday: two teams of three—where you've got a project coordinator, a design assistant and a designer or project manager—and then you have me. That's the vision I have now.

Growth is a process that you can do on your own in some ways, but it's a process that also requires community and engagement. A few years ago, I was talking about hiring with [Atlanta designer] Erika Ward and she said to me, "Here's what I tell people when I'm interviewing: 'When you put my name on your resume, you want it to mean something. I'm going to work hard so that it means something—but you want it to mean something too, and so how would you contribute to that?'" It gives me goosebumps to think about that.



The Teacher

When Atlanta-based designer **Whitney Ray** founded **Wyeth Ray Interiors** with architect **Joel Kelly** in 2017, she started out slowly—taking three or four projects a year at first, then making a few hires. Then, in 2021, growth came quickly: The firm ended the year with six employees and 29 projects in the books, and had more than doubled its revenue.

How has your job changed as your firm has grown?

I never really had an interest in delegating. I like designing the project and being super hands-on through every part of the process. It happened to me at an install just this morning: No one could figure out how to put the bed together, and then I get under there and I'm like, "Guys, this is it." So I think the hardest thing for me is understanding that I can't be *that* for 29 projects. I could work 24/7 and still not be able to do every single thing, so I need to find where delegating is good for the project and where it's not. For certain things, junior designers are not comfortable, or they don't want the responsibility of making the decision. So it's figuring out how to encourage them to grow in their position but making sure they're at the level that they need to be as well.

How do you balance that for so many people who are at different points in that journey?

At our size—there are six of us—I'm able to make it an individual journey. I do reviews every six months, and every time I say, "These are the things that I think you're outstanding at, and these are the areas of opportunity. How can we get you to that next point?" The goal is to have senior designers someday so that I can take even more steps back from the day-to-day, which means that I can take on more jobs. But I don't think that it helps the company move forward if anyone is uncomfortable in their role. They're not only trying to be better designers, they're trying to understand my aesthetic and why I do the things the way I do so that they are comfortable doing them as well, and all of that takes training and one-on-one time.

You said you'll need to step back more to grow. Are you preparing for a role where you are further removed from the day-to-day?

I don't ever want to be a figurehead, but I also don't want to be the person who solves every problem. While I still want to have my hand in the design phase, there is so much follow-up that goes on—and right now, I still try to make sure that I'm aware of it all so I'm never caught out of the loop. I never want a client calling me to ask a question and I have no idea what they're talking about. I think the goal would be to set the general guidelines for the project and then hand it over to someone who can bring their own spin to it—letting them bring things to me that maybe I haven't thought of, and having the design process be a little bit more collaborative. And then they feel ownership, which I think will help them throughout the project to be more comfortable in a role of responsibility. To me, a senior designer is definitely not a principal designer—it's not the person making all the final decisions, but it is someone who has more responsibility on their shoulders to make decisions.

How have you gotten comfortable with sharing responsibility?

I think that if I were talking about not even being involved in some projects, I'd be having a panic attack. But for me, it's more the realization that a slight step back could be a massive step forward at the same time.

What are the important lessons you want your junior designers to learn?

It's a lot about the psychology behind the design. For example, say we know what



In a room for the Southeastern Showhouse in Atlanta, Whitney Ray created a luxurious layered study that seems to glow from within.



the right design decision is but a client is struggling with it. This is why you can't just tell your employees, "Do it this way." You need to massage it—clients need to understand the reasons and see photos and maybe even a SketchUp model. We need to get them on our side so that they trust us—gaining trust from a client is by far the best thing you can get. They'll follow you down any avenue if you can get that trust. Instilling that knowledge in my junior designers, in addition to teaching the design itself, is really important.

Explaining as you go sounds easy, but it adds a step to everything you do.

How do you find that time to coach your staff?

We're extremely organized about having time on the calendar to review things. On Mondays, for example, we don't take client meetings. Instead, we have a very large team meeting where I go through every project with the junior designers to find out where they are, what they're doing, what they're working on that week and how we can get to the next step. Then there's free time on my calendar in the afternoon for them to come back and say, "I couldn't get that to work. What do you think about this?" Making a specific time for coaching and communication gets rid of that awkward "Can I get 30 seconds of your time?" as you're rushing out the door.

How has putting energy into growth felt for you?

I feel immensely proud of the amount of growth that we've been able to not just have, but also handle well. There have definitely been days where we are very stressed, but there hasn't been a situation that we haven't been able to overcome or figure out a way to make work. We are very much a team. And I think that's why we've been successful. I don't think that we could have been successful if we were competitive with each other in a bad way. Competition is good, but it does you no good to want someone else on the same team to fail. We're all cheering for one another, and that mentality is something that I'm very proud of.

Do you want to keep growing the firm?

I am a sucker for growth. I have no issue adding to the team if we need to, but growth doesn't necessarily mean more projects. It can also mean bigger, more substantial projects. I went into this year with the mentality that being a little bit more selective in our projects is another level that we're going to rise to. I think that it's definitely going to be a good year for us. Knock on wood.



The Perfectionist

Lauren Lerner left a sales and marketing career to found the Scottsdale, Arizona-based firm Living with Lolo five years ago. With record sales in 2021, she is taking a moment to reassess what comes next.

What was your approach to growing your team?

Prior to starting my business, I was in a totally different industry. So for me, it was figuring out what I enjoy doing the most, but also [the areas] where I'm not strong so that I can hire people with those skills. I went through the process for a week, making a list of every single thing I did during the course of the day and figuring out what I'm comfortable teaching someone else how to do and taking over versus where I need to maintain responsibility.

When did you start making that list?

It was about two years in when I really felt like I needed to bring somebody on. At that point, I didn't really know what that role looked like; I just knew I needed help with all of the ordering and tracking. I started looking for somebody who was well rounded, and it was actually one of my very first clients who came to work for me. She's been able to grow along with my business and help me figure out what other roles I need to be hiring for, as well.

When you started making that list to see what you could give away, what did you decide?

I decided to grow my business more on the back office side, so I have a director of operations who handles all the customer service—that's my former client who joined the team early on. If a client is ever unhappy, she is empowered to resolve the issue before it escalates. I also brought in an executive assistant, because when I looked at all of the things that I was doing in the course of the day that were taking up my time, some of them were personal. I realized that I could easily give those things to someone else, and that would free up more of my time for my business. It's nice to have somebody who can help me with the random things that come up—if something needs to change on my website, or if I need to mail a package, the assistant can take that stuff off my plate.



I love that people on your team are empowered to solve problems. How do you create that environment?

In my past life, I was a regional manager for a couple of different retail brands, where I managed hundreds of people. I didn't really enjoy managing a lot of people, so I've tried to craft the positions carefully as I grow my team. I think it's about working through examples with them until you feel that the way that they're handling something is the way that you would handle it. Then, at a certain point, you have to let them know that you don't want to be notified of issues that they're dealing with unless it becomes out of control.

How does removing yourself help?

I am a perfectionist, and I like to be involved in stuff—but I also know that if

^
A graphic wallcovering enlivens a soothing bedroom by Lauren Lerner, bathed in a medley of blue hues.

I know there's a problem, I'm going to be thinking about it. Having me out of the loop ensures that they can handle it without my input, and they feel like they can make the decisions. And yes, there have been times when maybe they've done something that I wouldn't have done, but that doesn't mean it's the wrong decision, and I feel like we can always talk through it. It's important not to tell them that they made a bad decision because I don't ever want to take away their confidence in solving problems moving forward. Instead, we'll discuss it in a positive way: What could we have done to handle this situation a little bit differently? It's a gradual process, but it's also about working with people long enough to feel really confident that they are handling things as if it were you.



You have also contracted out a lot of work instead of hiring people internally to take those roles.

Outsourcing has been really important to my business. I hired a team that handles my social media, a PR team and teams that do my website and SEO. These are all people who are not employed by me but they are handling what they do best. It's unlikely I would have found one person who could do all of those things as well as those outsourced teams.

What's the hardest part about growing your team?

Whenever you hire someone, it feels like you take a few steps back because you have to slow down and train those people. It's not like they come on board and you immediately feel this sense of relief—there's an investment in training them so that they can get off on the right foot and can make a difference in your business.



The Risk Taker

Architect and designer **Eddie Maestri** credits much of the success of his Dallas-based firm **Maestri Studio** to betting on his future—whether that means opening an art gallery or starting to say no to small projects.

What are the levers you're pulling to drive your firm's growth?

Every year, I will usually say, "OK, what are we going to do this year to set ourselves up for the next few years?" Every single time, it's a complete leap of faith, right? The first thing we did was get a space. Not too long after that, we started hiring. It's always a little bit scary to invest that kind of money in your business and not know what the next year has in store, but I needed to delegate more work. And of course with that, we needed more space, so we invested to expand. The next big investment was hiring a professional team to do our website. Then we decided that we wanted to be a little bit more of a—I hate to call it a lifestyle brand, but to be a little bit more all-encompassing. We opened an art gallery in our space, which was a big plunge.

So how big is your team today?

There are four of us, and our sales last year were \$3 million—and that doesn't include any remodel cost. We're really proud of that number, and I know that our team is so much smaller than most design firms that are doing that number. I think it's because everybody is very high caliber, versus a lot of lower-level people.

When you pivoted to design, did you always plan to build a team?

I thought it would be just me. I loved the fact that I was running my business and I wasn't managing anyone—I was directly responsible for the sales and for everything that happened. It was such a breath of fresh air. But at a certain point I realized that if I was going to keep growing my business—and I had the leads coming in to do it—I needed to bring on people.

There are also some things that just don't work out. When we opened the art gallery, we had a lot of retail items, and we even became a showroom for our lighting company. We quickly realized that, despite the investment, the retail component was just not the right decision. I own the building, so we had the space, but we're not in a retail location. We're shipping art all over the world—to Japan and Australia and Massachusetts—but we're not getting walk-ins. You have to say, "OK, how do we learn from that? How do we grow with that?" We keep investing back and saying, "What is going to take us to that next level?"

Where does hiring fit into that ongoing, continuous kind of growth?

It's so important to have a person available to do the work that we have coming in, but to have the right person can be really hard. Or sometimes, I've realized that while we need another person on the team, hiring another person and growing the team means that I actually have less time in my day because I now have to oversee that person—mentor them, answer questions and all those things that come with hiring.

A couple of years ago, we had a huge influx of work, and we hired for it. But I started to realize that it was just not sustainable. I was working all the time even though I had this full team because I had to be a part of every project and answer questions. I'd be getting text messages from people who were working late at night, and I was finally like, "This is just not working." I am very proud that I've never had to let anyone go. Instead, we had a big audit internally of how many hours we were spending on this or that type of job. As a team, we discussed the kinds of projects we really want, and the kinds of projects we thought were weighing us down. That's when we made a really bold strategic decision to say, "We're only going to do this type of work." In the past few months, I've realized that I don't know that we want to go any bigger. There are 12 of us now, and it's hard enough managing the day-to-day. So our biggest thing is pushing for the projects we're most proud of—better projects that are full service.

Did that feel like a risk in the moment, or like an opportunity?

The scary part is the risk of losing the word-of-mouth business from great clients. They've told their friends, "We had a great experience with Maestri Studio," and now we're like, "We're so sorry, but we're not doing additions anymore." But we had to make the call: We just can't manage all these types of

jobs and do it all well. We want to focus on what we all think is beneficial to us, as a work environment and strategically.

How has that changed your approach?

I've been way more strategic about when I hire. The biggest thing for me, as an employer, is that I want someone who is with me—I want a team that stays. And I always convey this to my team: I'd rather have someone have to work a little bit more on a deadline than hire another person and then say, "Well, if this doesn't keep up, I don't know what we'll have in store for you in six months." I want that reliability, where they know that we're all good and we can sustain this.

You mentioned needing to delegate.

How did you get comfortable giving away parts of the job?

A lot of us business owners, we have that personality where it's hard to delegate. I definitely do have a hard time with it because I know that the reality is that most of the time, I *can* do it quicker and exactly how I want it. You have to delegate anyway and put trust in the person you've hired. I'm not going to hire someone who's not qualified to make these decisions and do this work. And a lot of times, I've been pleasantly surprised by what they did—it might not be exactly how I would have done it, but it's a way for me to learn too. The other thing is to make sure that they know I have their back if, for some reason, it fails. That's the key.

I do touch everything, but I have definitely made room for the team to have more input on the design. I want them to feel creative and get better at what they do. I mean, I still review everything and put my two cents in—"Hey, we could tweak it like this to make it better"—but I've found that the work has been getting better and better because they are using their creativity.

I've made it really clear to my team that this is not The Eddie Show. I want a studio. That's why we changed the firm's name to Maestri Studio a few years ago—I wanted it to be a collaborative effort, and one of the things that I ran into a lot were clients who'd say, "Oh, no, I only want Eddie." And I'm like, "Well, actually, this whole team worked on your drawings." It's about educating the client so they know that I'm involved but that a lot of the great ideas came from this team of people.

As you have focused on retaining your team, how have you created pathways for growth?

We've definitely had changes in roles and changes in how day-to-day actions work and who reports to who. Growing does



mean more responsibility for them, because at some point, it means that they have to manage someone else. Part of it is periodically checking in on our official titles—making sure they reflect the work, that the team is happy with them and that the titles make each person feel proud.

We used to have an annual sit-down in the conference room. Lately, I've been more casual about it, like, "Hey, let's go to lunch and chat." For example, I recently asked one of my lead interior designers, "What is your hope? Where do you want to see us? Where do you want to see the work?" One of the things that came out of that conversation was that one of her dreams is to have our work published nationally. I've taken that to heart, and when we were looking for PR representation, I was like, "Hey, I think this is the next step for us, and this will make Katie really happy."

One of the hardest things is acknowledging, "Yes, they want X, Y and Z, but is it feasible?" And sometimes, you have to say, "You know what, I love the idea, but that's not going to work." Or the reality of, "Hey, if you want to have this role, it's on us to bring in more money." The longer you have employees, of course everybody wants a raise or wants a bonus, but you have to have the money for that. There's not an endless supply.

^
A sculptural light fixture and brass accents enliven a sleek kitchen by Eddie Maestri and the Studio Maestri team.

I've also realized that some people really don't want to manage anyone else—and that's OK, but I've had to tell them, "Well, if you don't want to do that, we have to reset the expectations of where your role goes." You can't be the leader of a department and not lead anyone. We can probably still have a trajectory in terms of goals, but it might not be what you've always had in mind. Everyone is different, and I'm trying to navigate with them on what they want to do.

That sort of brings us back to the audit you did of the work that was most profitable.

Totally. It was a moment to educate my employees and to show them that there were some jobs where we were just not making any money. If we want to hire more people, it takes a lot of work to get there financially. Sure, the demand is there, but that doesn't always mean that profits are soaring through the roof, because we have more people to handle that work. If we had five jobs four years ago versus 15 now—we're still doing the same amount of work but I have more overhead to deal with.

The biggest opportunity I see is to pick and choose what jobs we take. That gives us a lot of leeway for our work to get even better.

PHOTOGRAPHY: MAESTRI INTERIOR, JENIFER MCNEIL BAKER



The CEO

Oakland, California- and Atlanta-based designer **Kelly Finley** of Joy Street Design started her career as a corporate attorney. Now she's looking to build a design empire, which means developing a team that can make decisions without her.

You stepped away from your firm for two weeks to install your room at the Kips Bay Decorator Show House in Palm Beach, Florida—and it changed the way you were thinking about your firm's growth. What happened?

Obviously everybody knew I was going to be in Florida for two weeks. We didn't make a big announcement to the clients or anything like that; I did have an out-of-office email set up, but that was kind of perfunctory. I was like, "I'm going down to Florida. I'll be busy during the day, but feel free to text me."

Then all the wheels fell off. It was pure chaos the first few days we were down there because our room still looked like a construction zone the day before pictures. I'm an inbox-zero person, but I had 70 to 100 emails that I actually needed to read—that's how bad it was. That was really difficult for my team, because they had all these questions and I wasn't even logging on to see them. And then after the hard part of the project was done, I ended up being so exhausted by the meet-and-greet part of the opening that I was not waking up early enough to answer their questions before my day would begin. Over the course of those two weeks, it was basically radio silence from me.

Was it the first time you'd ever disconnected like that?

Maybe for a vacation. But because we didn't know what to expect, we did not set it up in such a way that my team had other people to go to. It really highlighted for me that we need to make sure that people understand the fundamentals so that my absence doesn't cause problems in the future. We have full teams, and they shouldn't necessarily need to talk to me, but they were so worried about their decision making that they just didn't make the decisions.

When I came back this week, I did one-on-ones with everybody. I said, "Here are the things that I think we need

to work on." Some of it is reminding them that we have a huge policy book that outlines, "After this meeting, these are the five things you should do," and "To prepare for this meeting, these are the six things you can do." No one has needed to rely on that when I'm around, so now we're going back to fundamentals.

Did this illustrate for you where you want to be less involved in day-to-day processes?

Yes. I am actually one of those designers who has no desire to run projects. Some people are like, "Even when I hire, I want to make sure I make all the decisions." That's not me. I always knew I wanted to be the creative director—I want to dictate the direction and be able to say when I don't like something, but I don't need to be the person picking everything. My issue was that I thought we were much closer to that than we evidently were.

How do you create that boundary?

We're trying to work more collaboratively. In general, I give overall direction for the concept. I might say, "This is a coastal property, but I don't want to do blues. I want it to be more like the sunset when it meets the sky." We talk about what that means, and then they go find those images and bring them back. I can say, "That's right," or "No, that's not what I meant." But at this point, if I'm not the lead designer on the project, which I'm trying not to do, I don't ever go searching for anything. My team has full control over that. Yes, I'll sometimes say I don't like something, but then they go back to reselect something else that they like.

If you are delegating the design work, where do your clients see you throughout the process?

For 80 percent of our projects, there's another lead designer. I go to the initial consultation and I tell the clients, "We're going to send you a proposal." I don't say, "This is the last time you'll see me," but I'll say something like, "A lead designer and a design assistant are going to be attached to your project, and they are going to be the people you talk to every day." From the moment clients sign, the lead designer is their person. They go to the first meeting to get measurements and they do the presentations. I'll pop in every so often because some people want that—especially clients who knew us before we had so many people on our team. Maybe I'll pop in while they're meeting about the concept and say, "Hey, you're in good hands. Ashley and I talked about this," just so they know that everything's still going through me. I very rarely have any clients push back on that.

What would you have told me two or three weeks ago about your philosophy around growth, and what has changed?

I would've told you that I'm moving forward with an org chart that has me as the CEO of the larger organization and the creative director of the design firm. That is still what I'm moving toward, but I've realized that we are still building it.

What do you hope that will remove from your plate, and what will that mean for you?

I have an operations person who handles the day-to-day administration and project management; a marketing person to oversee marketing and branding; and a financial person who can analyze the numbers for me. The goal is that I won't be doing eight hours of CEO stuff during the day and then needing to do four hours of creative work at night. I also think that I am a visionary for the firm, and it will allow me to think about what's next. We have a ton of things in the hopper right now that only get my attention peripherally.

So many designers struggle with delegating, but I love that you're eager to give work away.

I'm all about business coaching, I'm in Entrepreneurs' Organization [a nonprofit business network], and I've had tons of coaches come to the office. One of them told me, "You have to delegate, not abdicate." I'm working on that, but I'm an abdicator: I'm like, "Once I give this to you, it is yours." I will not think about it again—or, let me be clear, I will not think about it again until it's overdue, and then I'm looking at you and I'm upset. What I *should* do is say, "Here's this project, let's touch base in two days and let me know if you have any questions." I do that to some extent, but ultimately as soon as it's off my plate, I expect people to be confident to do the job that they're supposed to do, and I overestimate that.

You're assuming everyone can do it just like you.

Exactly. I blame that mindset on working at a corporate law firm, where if people can't hack it, they have to leave. It's taken me a while to recognize that just because I can do CAD in two hours, that doesn't mean that's normal, and that doesn't mean that it's a problem when somebody else can't.

How does knowing that about yourself shape your approach?

I've always known that I have high expectations. But then I had a business coach who ran tests and said, without



knowing me, “You’re fast, and you expect other people to be fast.” That really changed my perspective. It made me realize that it takes a certain type of person to work with me, and at the advice of that coach, I now actually say that at the end of every job interview. I say, “OK, I just want to give you some caveats: I am direct, and if you’re going to be sensitive, you should not work with me. I have high expectations, I’m very fast and I expect you to be the same, and it’ll take me a while to get over the fact that you might not be.” Part of it is to make sure that the person doesn’t come in timid and scared—because I have had that, too—but it’s also for me to gauge their reaction.

When you’re working with type A people all day long and literally arguing with people for a living the way I did as a litigator, it is so natural to just be direct with other people. So having a coach point it out really helped. To me, I was just sending an email that said, “No, I don’t like that tile, it’s ugly.” But for some of my team, that really hurt their feelings, and so it was confusing to them when I’d be like, “Hey, let’s go have lunch!” The email hadn’t meant anything to me. We do a lot of personality tests in the office now, and it has helped me tremendously in how I interact with people, and sometimes it makes me read my email one more time before I send it. I’m not willing to not say when I’m unhappy about something, so it doesn’t change what needs to happen, but maybe it changes the way I go about doing it. For one person, I’ll call them into a room and have that conversation privately, whereas for someone else I might casually stop by their desk and be like, “Hey, what happened here?”

What has it felt like as a business owner to grow your team?

I get to gainfully employ all these women in doing something that they love, and I get to do it in a way that matches all of my values. Everybody on our team gets unlimited vacation, health insurance, a 401K, a \$1,500 education credit and a \$1,500 travel stipend—all of these things that allow them to enjoy their jobs. We have our first person on maternity leave, and now I get why people don’t give maternity leave—it’s expensive! But to be able to do that makes me so proud and grateful. As a designer, you’re making decisions that change people’s homes. But as a business owner, you can really enjoy seeing how your decisions affect the company. Once you truly step out of the day-to-day design, you get to make an organization that you are proud of that really symbolizes your beliefs.

“
I get to gainfully employ all these women in doing something that they love, and I get to do it in a way that matches all of my values.”

KELLY FINLEY

◀
In the latest Kips Bay Decorator Show House in Palm Beach, Florida, Kelly Finley of Joy Street Design deployed two graphic tile patterns in a showstopping bathroom suite.

A lot of designers say they build their firms around preserving the things they love to do. Do you still feel like you’ve done that?

I’ve heard that before, but I also think you build the firm around where you are no longer needed. I hired the way I did because I’m trying to build an empire—but more importantly, I’m trying to build a business and not just my job. As long as I’m doing things that other people could do instead, that means this is just a job.

I never think about being an attorney at this point, ever—I never look back and think, “I wish I hadn’t switched careers.” But the thing that I have learned about myself is that while I love being an interior designer, I love being a business owner about the same and maybe more. I love what we’re able to create.



The Mentor

After a decade at Polo Ralph Lauren, Michael Cox co-founded the New York-based design firm Foley&Cox with fellow Ralph Lauren alum Mary Foley in 2002. In the two decades that followed, he has honed a process for mentoring young talent—but never stopped learning himself.

What were your guideposts when you started thinking about how you wanted to grow your team?

I was at Ralph Lauren for 10 years, and I often refer to myself as a graduate of Polo University. It was an amazing decade of postgraduate work in terms of the opportunities that corporation gave me within the home sector. From the moment Mary and I left that environment to start a firm, we knew we wanted to create an office in which everyone was challenged by where they were in their career development.

That’s hard to do.

It is, but 20 years later, we now have a team of people thinking and working that way, and it’s incredible to witness the sharing of experience. We’ve been intentional about implementing certain triggers to make sure we stay focused on

that. It can be something as simple as the postmortem we do at the end of every project. With the crazy pace of our projects and the industry, you often work on a project for 12 or 18 or 24 months—and once you do the install, it’s easy to be like, “Happy client, project completed, onto the next one.” But we decided that, no, it’s important to take a moment, sit down as a team and reflect. What went well, and what was an unanticipated curveball? What could we do differently—and better—on the next one? We share that with the team that was involved on the project, but then we also share it with the rest of the firm so that we can incorporate [those findings] into some of the standard operating procedures we have established. It’s an important moment to take the time to say, “We’re all learning together.” We’re all at different parts of our career path, but there’s always something to share and learn from every step of the way.

Is that something you’ve always done, or is that a more recent development?

I would say, to be frank, the first five years were like, “Are we going to be in business next year?” It takes years to find your stride, and to learn the early lessons of what’s working and what’s not. Then the focus shifts from the client to the team, on some level. At the beginning, the client is the financial factor that allows the firm to survive, so that’s your priority and you are anxious to exceed the client’s expectations so that you’re building a great relationship, and then you’re anxious to find the next client.

But that wanes? That will be a relief for some readers, I think.

You get to a different stage in the development of the firm where you have more well-established relationships with your clients—hopefully they’re going to come to us for the second home or the third home—so you can focus more on the team that you’re building. There’s no way that you can operate successfully at the high end of the design spectrum without a team of amazing people.

How do you structure a firm to really reflect that ethos of developing your team members?

We’re a team of 11 with a loose organizational chart, but there are tiers that clarify a growth path. We take on interns, who often grow into a role that we define as apprentice. I think that’s something that is especially interesting, important and relevant: that old concept of apprenticeship, which goes back to the leather goods and metalwork industries, where young people were brought in to be trained

and developed very carefully, slowly and intentionally. After that, we have a design assistant, and then designers and executives. That loose structure gives incoming individuals a clear idea of opportunities for growth, and a sense that there is a path toward development and evolving in their careers. As people evolve within the firm—I say that first you have to learn how to own the problem, and then you have to learn how to own the process, and then you can learn to own the project.

That concept of being carefully, slowly, intentionally developed—does that still resonate with young people today? Everyone seems like they're in such a rush!

That's a great question. The majority of the feedback I've gotten is that it feels unique and special to the people who have experienced it—I would say 95 to 99 percent of the feedback has been positive. And especially if they've come to us from another firm, they talk about the difference in our onboarding and initial development process—the intentional team-building meetings and inspiration-sharing sessions we have.

What makes that onboarding process so different from what happens at other firms?

There is a very specific structure: A new employee comes in with a highly defined schedule for their first two weeks at the firm, including a scheduled time with every team member and a focus for those meetings. Each team member has an agenda so that the apprentice has the opportunity to interact with everyone on the team and also get that individual's perspective on a specific aspect of the business and the process and the firm.

Now, 20 years in, we're at the point where we're developing our own roster of Foley&Cox graduates. We've grown and cultivated individuals who have gone out and started their own firms, and that's incredibly gratifying to witness and to know that we were a part of that development. I mean, obviously as the business owner, it's a bittersweet moment because you don't want to lose this amazing person you've enjoyed working with and watched grow. But at the same time, for me as the founding principal, it's like, "As an entrepreneur, how could I deny that entrepreneurial spirit in someone else?"

So many designers lament that loss. I think that's a really beautiful way to think about it.

I want to be very transparent about that and say, again, it's not all roses. It's a bittersweet moment.

It probably feels very catastrophic in the moment.

The first time it's a dagger to your heart. The first time is the worst. But then I was able to put it into the context of how I was developed and learned so much at Ralph Lauren. I was challenged so much by my years at that company. How could I not be proud of continuing that? And that's a natural part of the process.

How has your job changed as you've developed and grown your team?

There is a tipping point that you reach in your career when you begin to recognize that you have as much to teach as you have to learn. That's an interesting moment in all of our evolutions. It's like you're a sponge, absorbing so much design inspiration through research and travel and working with incredibly talented artisans and craftspeople, and so you're constantly learning and you never want to stop learning, obviously. But you do reach a point where you begin to say, "Wait, I have a lot to share, and I need to be much more focused and intentional with the sharing of what I've learned."

Have you ever felt a sense of loss about parts of your role that you delegated to others?

Almost every day. The most top-of-mind example is from last night. I was at a dinner celebrating Amy Meier, who just launched a collection for Hartmann & Forbes, and one of her team members asked me something about being in the showroom. I said, "Well, yeah, I'm sure my team knows." Unfortunately, I am now at a point where I'm removed from that process of going from showroom to showroom gathering samples. I'm farther removed from that than I'd really like to be, because I love it. It's the thrill of the hunt and the thrill of discovery. That's the DNA of a designer, right? That's how you start.

When did you realize that you needed to step away from some parts of the job you loved in order to focus your time and attention elsewhere? How do you make that decision?

I believe that we all have to continue to grow. I often say—I exaggerate to make a point—that if you are not growing, then the best-case scenario is that you're stagnating, and the worst-case scenario is that you're regressing. When you put it into that context, it is easier to focus on constantly growing and challenging yourself. And I think that's just a great way to encourage people to push themselves and to take on something that's a little bit daunting.



Michael Cox and the Foley&Cox team meld traditional influences with modern touches in a dining room on New York's Long Island.



The Curator

In the first decade of running architecture and design firm Workshop/APD, Andrew Kotchen and his co-founder Matt Berman strategically diversified their portfolio to ensure steady growth even in uncertain times. Over the years, their team swelled to nearly three dozen employees. Then the pandemic hit, and the firm doubled in size again. Growth at that scale means being a leader, but also building the firm's next generation of leaders from within.

Your firm has grown from pretty big to really big in the past two years. What does that feel like, and how have you approached this latest round of hires?

One of my very early mentors once told me that no matter what you do or where you go in your career, you need to always preserve a portion of your time to do what you love. If we allow growth to dilute our pleasure about what we do and where our strengths lie, then growth becomes something that you fight instead of something you can embrace and enjoy. So as Workshop/APD has grown, that's been the foundation for our growth.

We decided early on that we were never going to grow in size only based on projects—we were going to grow with a long-term strategy in mind, when we felt we were ready to dip our toe into that next chapter of a firm's progression. By thinking that way, we have never put ourselves in the position where we were growing and contracting based on our projects and workflow.

Does that end up meaning that you hire in groups instead of onesie-twowie hires?

It means we're always looking for great new talent, and we will invest in that talent even if we don't believe the work is there today. The belief is the work will be there tomorrow. But that's also where the stress comes in, right?

Growth doesn't have to be scary if you loosely map it out. We have doubled our size in terms of people—gone from 40 people to 80 people right now. We were able to do that only because we had built an infrastructure of leadership. We have a core group of people who have

been with us for 15 or 16 years, and we have hired another round of amazing leadership folks, so we had that upper-tier leadership and management in place that allowed us to grow. As you know, there's no talent on the streets right now—everybody is hired, and it's an employee's market. They can go wherever they want, and they can name their price. But we were able to get a lot of upper-middle management, and those people wanted to come to work for us. When you get to a point in your career where people want to be part of your team, that also makes it easier to build a team quicker.

When you're talking about that many team members, does it start to get easier to make a hire?

All of it is terrifying. The reality of the kind of growth we were experiencing really hit me when we were doing bonuses at the end of last year. We're a very bonus-heavy firm—we bonus people really well, and we always have, even when we're not as profitable as we'd like to be, just because we believe in rewarding people for their great work.

But when you're talking about bonuses for 80 people, that number has a lot more zeros.

That number has zeros and zeros, and the zeros keep going. It's pretty daunting, but it's also exhilarating, exciting and energizing all at the same time.

I am always the pessimist. If you talked to my co-founder Matt, he is this hopeful optimist who floats in the clouds. But finally, after 23 years, I am optimistic, too. I believe that the phone is going to keep ringing—even when the economy turns, I still feel like the phone is going to ring enough to support this level of an office. The creative growth and the financial growth are two different things. Creative growth is building the team, trusting the team and moving projects forward; financial growth is really building financial security, which is where the stress comes from.

How do you project that growth?

I always try to reinforce to everybody in the office: Our burn rate is X, and to become more profitable and to grow, we have to be X times .02. With inflation, and with people wanting raises, it is just constant. We have been fortunate enough to work with a company called Precise that specializes in financial modeling for our kind of architecture and engineering firms. They have changed our ability to see the future at Workshop/APD that we never could before—we model things out as if we're a financial institution.

The more legs you put on the stool to give you a more secure foundation, the more confidence you have to take risks and grow your firm with less fear. So when you're looking at spreadsheets that show your cash flow is great 12 months out, you feel pretty good about making certain decisions, and you can project out that modeling. You can look back and take historical trends, and you know that's the number side of it.

So many firms grow very reactively, where everybody is stretched so thin before the principal finally caves and hires the next person. How do you get out of that mindset and start getting ahead of that cycle?

"I've got enough work for three people to do and the phone keeps ringing"—that's what they all say, right? I've coached a lot of people through hiring their first, second, third and fourth employees, and it's pretty simple: What are you good at? Personally, I'm good at meeting the clients—I'm able to generate the work. You have to ultimately believe in yourself and that you can do what you're good at, and you've got to put your ego aside and know that you're not always good at everything.

Then it just becomes a numbers game: If I hire another person, I can be out doing something and actually be billing 175 percent of what I billed last week for every hour of the day. So not only do I take work off my plate and relieve my stress, I can make more money. It's a very simple thing, but it all comes back to investing in yourself and believing in yourself that you can step over that line to release control to someone else.

You say that it's simple, but that sounds hard!

It's impossible. I still deal with it every day, but otherwise you're always going to be this stressed-out solo practitioner who can never get out of your own way.

You can also step over that line and believe that other people can do some of the things you do day-to-day and do it well—maybe not as well as you, but that's part of having employees and growing. You have to be willing to say, "For the next 12 months, I'm going to make less money, but I'm going to invest in myself and my business." Then when everyone makes that step, they find they're making double the money.

At what point did you start to feel your role change as the firm grew?

It really changed the second year. With two people, your role changes because you're either sharing decision making or you're sharing responsibilities. Another

shift came when we became a firm of five to six people. I have not drawn anything on a computer since then. I sketch all the time, but I don't get into the production side of a project because there are other people who are better at it. I can generate all the work, and so that's what my role has become.

You have two fellow partners at the firm now. How do you divide the responsibilities between yourselves?

All three of our partners manage different aspects of the business, and we all try to stay in our lanes: one is marketing and PR, one is product and HR, and one is technology and running the office. We have realized the things that we are good at and the things we are passionate about. We have tried to create a system where we report to one another, and where we report to people in the office, because you can't have any 80-person firm with 80 direct reports. You'd suck up all your time communicating with those people.

You realize as you grow that you can have only so much one-on-one interaction, and then you need to create another layer. We often refer to ourselves as editors and curators, not producers, and that happened really in the five-to-10-people range. Back then, I said I never wanted to go above 18; then we were 20 and I said never wanted to be above 25. And next thing you know, we looked up and we had doubled.

When you look back, is there any piece of you that misses your role when the firm was smaller?

I really enjoyed connecting with the people in the office. Now I want to know them and be friendly, but I can't have 80 office friends. And they don't know I'm that person who wants to get to know them, either. To them, I'm just a person on the other side of a Zoom call who gets angry sometimes, and that's kind of a bummer. There are, quite frankly, a lot of people whose names I don't know, and I don't like that. That has been the hardest part.

Has working remotely been part of that, or is it just a numbers thing?

Well, one, we will never be back in our office five days a week. We're probably going to be a three- to four-day office. That's the new normal. But I also just think the numbers are such—and my schedule is such—that there's no time to build those foundational relationships with newer people. The reality is that the next layer of leadership in our office is building those relationships, and that's the future of our firm.

“

You have to be willing to say, 'For the next 12 months, I'm going to make less money, but I'm going to invest in myself and my business.' Then when everyone makes that step, they find they're making double the money.

ANDREW KOTCHEN

> Andrew Kotchen and the Workshop/APD team designed this house on a hill in Armonk, New York, so that its great room opens on three sides, welcoming in the breeze.

You mentioned before that being willing to let go of certain things is an essential part of this journey.

How do you get more comfortable with that?

If Matt were on this call, he would say I've never done it. Sometimes my team still needs to remind me, "We've got this and it is going to work out." But it's never easy. Control freaks are going to be control freaks, and we want to have our hand in everything. Just like everything else, the more you can fall back on historical successes and know that things happen right, it's easier to step out.

Are there also some things you hold onto because it makes you feel fulfilled, even if maybe it's not the most efficient?

Oh, my God, I think there are probably a hundred things like that. A big one is that I micromanage our photography. I pick every photo that goes on our website with [our internal marketing team]. I think it drives them crazy, but I see photography in such a specific way and I am very controlling about how we showcase images. It's my greatest thrill, seeing the work completed, and I feel like the lens that I see it through has been successful, so I want to perpetuate that.

I also get involved on the construction management side. I sometimes get criticized for spending so much time on job sites, but I love the banter with general contractors and the process. That's probably not always the best use of my time in a firm of our size, but I love it, and I don't believe in working for two years on a project on paper and not going to see it while it's getting built.

You made the distinction between creative growth and financial growth before. Which one do you lead with?

I think you should lead with creative growth. Maybe that's cliché, but I think creative growth is becoming more confident in the ideas and visions that you have—being committed to them and seeing them through, and not being insecure about your point of view. If you've mastered that, the other one is going to happen.

Look, I'll readily admit that I've worked my ass off and I want to make a lot of money. I'm not embarrassed to say it. So many people in this business are embarrassed to say it, but they're all lying. Every one of them! I want to make the money, but I also know that the money is the byproduct of everything else. I don't think you can focus on making money first and expect everything else to happen. In this business it's not going to get you where you need to go. □