

History—From Husband And Wife To President And CEO

According to its recently updated website, Dixon Schwabl is now 20 years old. The company was founded by Lauren Dixon, its CEO, who had previously been a local television on-air personality as well as advertising salesperson. Her husband and agency President, Mike Schwabl, had been a relatively unknown photographer prior to entering the advertising field. Over the years, the company grew steadily serving a range of long-term clients such as the Hoselton Auto Group, Wilson Farms, Roberts Wesleyan College and others. In the late 1990s the company began to bolster its public relations function and was behind the visible “Horses On Parade” program that it undertook in partnership with High Falls Brewing.

My intersection with Dixon Schwabl occurred just two years ago, in February 2005 as I began providing freelance copywriting services for the company. After a number of weeks of freelancing 30 hours a week, the company offered me a job at a rate that was very close to what they were paying me as a freelancer. In addition, at just 30 hours a week, the position would enable me a little time to serve my own clients during the day as well as pursue other interests such as graduate school.

As someone of recognized talent who had been “burned” in previous relationships with ad agency employers, I had long maintained my independence. I loved the agency business but preferred my role as an outside vendor primarily because it freed me from worry about internal politics, my role in the organization and my future advancement. I took frequent solace in the fact that I was likely making more money than the art directors, creative directors and others who were hiring me for my wordsmithing skills (Appendix: R8 and Power and Influence Paper)

But the Dixon Schwabl opportunity interested me. At first glance, the company seemed to be so dramatically different from the agencies that I had served previously. I noticed very few people staying past 5 p.m. something that indicated that people were neither overworked nor eager to impress the bosses by “putting in long hours.” In addition, the company seemed to have a more family-oriented culture. I was also taken by charming traditions such as monthly “jaz” events—team- and spirit-building activities organized by a different small group of employees every month.

A survey of the company roster also indicated that numerous people were accommodated with flexible work hours—from those who worked only 4-day weeks to others who had shortened workdays. As Mike Schwabl told me during the recruitment process—if you ever need to leave for anything like a family event, school play or anything, we're all about that!" I noticed that hardly any of the agency's key officers had experience working at other advertising agencies. Far from seeing this as an impediment, I initially viewed it as an advantage. Rochester agencies had not been doing well through the late 90's through 2005. There had been an over-dependence on clients that had once been large, prolific spenders on marketing but who had suffered downturns in their own industries and businesses. The agency's lack of management from among the culture of agency failures seemed to be one reason why it had survived and even thrived.

Success Factors—Growing Larger By Thinking Small

Like most every mid-size agency I know, Dixon Schwabl competes in a challenging business environment. Indeed, the Rochester market has seen an enormous reduction in the number of agencies of any significance over the past 10 years (and the company is largely local in its scope of services and clients served). Because of this, the company like other agencies typically competes for a limited number of clients.

Large Rochester Agencies Closing Between 1997 and 2007

- Ice Communications
- Saatchi & Saatchi (Worldwide agency's once thriving Rochester office closed in 2004)
- Hutchins Y&R
- Eric Mower & Associates (small sales function remains although once large office is gone)
- Buck & Pulleyn (closed recently)
- Adams Colway Associates

Dixon Schwabl has generally avoided the temptation to mine (or over mine) the communications opportunities offered by large clients like Kodak, Xerox and Bausch & Lomb. As Lauren Dixon told me prior to my joining the agency as an employee, "We don't like to have any of our clients representing more than 10 or 20 percent of our business." In late 2004 and early 2005, the agency may have indeed felt a little burned by having too large a client. Frontier Communications had recently removed a significant piece of its account, leading to layoffs in every department of the agency, particularly the creative group.

On balance, the company's decision to concentrate on smaller clients seemed to have merit. And it is clear that it gained much of its business over the years without having to pitch against other agencies. Because there are far more car dealerships and paint stores in the local market than there are Eastman Kodaks, the agency has gradually built a reputation as a results-oriented organization. As Kodak and Xerox trimmed their expenditures with local firms Dixon Schwabl never suffered, continuing to add small companies and organizations to its roster. Better to have 70 or 80 small clients than three or four large ones in the principals' view.

Industry Situation

Advertising agencies typically operate on a simple premise. Clients are served with creative, media, production and other capabilities, which support client communications goals for branding, sales increases, community relations and other goals. It is a relatively easy business to enter. In general, the industry is mature or in a mature/decline period.

The key success factor for most agencies is typically seen as 1) having a quality creative product and 2) diligent, responsive client service. This first success factor is something that has always worked against the agency. In the late 90s, the company got involved with "Companies Are People Too" an organization that uses the Myers-Briggs to help agencies align their culture to their world as well as help companies internal processes. In that process, the agency principals indicated to Companies Are People Too that it wanted to move from being known as the "drive-up" agency to an agency where "it is fun to do good work" (Appendix: CAPT documents). Yet the company's reputation as a sweatshop with little capability for a high level of creativity is one that remains. Any movement toward being "fun to do good work" has gone largely unnoticed. It's simply not a vision that's in peoples' hearts (Appendix: R12).

In the area of new business and client service, Dixon Schwabl has long benefited from the outgoing, energetic personality of CEO Lauren Dixon. A participant on numerous area boards and foundations, she is a one-woman outreach program. However, she would probably be one of the first to

admit that her stewardship and account management skills are less than sufficient to maintain long-term client satisfaction. These are delegated to a group of account service personnel.

Competitive Situation

Advertising is an attractive industry because of ease of entry. It is not capital intensive and personnel are relatively easy to find. These factors, however, mean that it is also a very competitive, (Appendix: R4).

There are plenty of practitioners from whom potential clients can purchase creative and other advertising-related services. In many cases the competition includes not only other agencies but also other industry segments that one might not typically consider to be creators of advertising. These include:

- Clients themselves—through in-house marketing communications functions
- Freelance writers, art directors and small design firms
- Media outlets—radio stations and newspapers typically offer in-house creative services
- Media buying services
- Printers and other vendors

The industry has also changed dramatically in that clients have felt free to negotiate downward in what commissions they will allow their agencies to collect and what mark-ups they will accept. Agencies have thus become more reliant on fees for hourly service fees and these are usually tightly budgeted. Clients exercise tremendous economic power at Dixon Schwabl, something that leaves many of the account people constantly in fear of losing business. This contributes to a generally risk-averse climate.

Company Situation

In a field where the ideal is to have agencies that present new and exciting ideas to clients, the agency clings to safe approaches both strategically and creatively. Its building projects a different image however. The décor is colorful and freewheeling, consistent with a “creative environment.” The conference room is spangled with upbeat clichés like “Make it Happen” and “Think Outside The Box”

Internal strengths include Dixon Schwabl’s committed, motivated owners. Having been an employee of a number of agencies I can honestly say that these are two of the hardest-working agency principals I have come across. One key advantage of this is that employees see owners putting in plenty of

time on the job and they feel naturally motivated to join the effort. I believe this is one of the company's key strengths though it is very little noticed by the people who work there.

Internal weaknesses abound however. There are no structured or regular systems for providing creative input. The creative people are frequently confronted with rush jobs and emergencies that result from either poor planning on the part of account staff or their own failure to maintain client expectations. I remember one instance where the client (Frontier Communications) presented the agency with a new project opportunity. Eager to please, the account representative (a managing partner at the agency) kept volunteering delivery dates that fell well ahead of when the client actually needed the work. And she did this without any sort of double-checking with creative personnel. Her objective was to put something in front of the client fast. The quality or suitability of the response seemed to be a secondary consideration. This impulse to deliver immediately not only creates chaos and discord internally, it tends to diminish the quality of the agency's effort. It is fine to impress a client by coming back to them in a few days but those enthusiasms diminish over time when the client gets substandard results, (Appendix: R4, R6).

An approach that insists on creative and strategic excellence first and foremost would require the company temper its impulse to simply "deliver" with the realization that the clients' needs are best served with work that delivers results beyond the clients' expectations.

Simple Structure Complicated By Lack Of Procedure

I have never seen anything resembling an organizational chart at Dixon Schwabl. The agency tends to eschew any formalized presentation of structure. And although it does enjoy giving people titles, it avoids reporting designations like boss or supervisor. The preferred term for a boss or supervisor is "go to" person. In essence the company's creative personnel have generally reported to both Lauren Dixon and Mike Schwabl, but with perhaps a more hard line to Mike Schwabl, who is the more junior of the husband and wife partnership—both in age and power inside the agency. Account service personnel report to Dixon. There are some smaller but less defined chains of command within the larger groupings. For example,

junior account executives would have an account supervisor or managing partner (with account service responsibility) as his or her “go to” person.

The agency is what would probably be classified as functional and fairly horizontal. There are only seven basic types of personnel at the agency including writers, art directors, account service personnel, public relations people, production people, accounting and support staff (Appendix: Approximate Agency Structure). The company has very little in the way of formalized feedback to employees. A recent attempt to implement formalized reviews is apparently not tied to salary increases. I never received any review during my two years there, save for an occasional good word or “thank you” from Mike Schwabl.

There is broad misunderstanding about individual roles within the company. Many account service personnel come to DS without a formal understanding of their role in the organization. And because most have no prior ad agency experience these new hires frequently face a difficult adjustment period. Because writers and media people traditionally have more experience in their functions outside of DS they may come into the company with a stronger notion of their roles. Yet few are prepared for the daily pace and pressure and most have grown weary of having to educate or accommodate new account people.

The organization and its environment

In analyzing Dixon Schwabl, it has become apparent that there are really two companies. That is, there is *the company that Dixon Schwabl genuinely wants to be* and *the company that it is most comfortable being*.

On the one hand, the company projects the idea of being an externally focused organization that is Theory Y in its management approach. Given the choice between defender and prospector as a self-description, DS would definitely say that it is a prospector organization. But the reality is that it is very much a defender. Competition with other agencies is avoided where possible. And as far as business is concerned, the agency gains its accounts from places where no agency incumbent typically exists. It is most comfortable as a company that gets commercials to radio stations and fills ad spaces in newspapers. It is uncomfortable as a company that creates any kind of advertising breakthrough. Its more workmanlike approach to creativity is something that has frequently garnered the disdain of the larger Rochester

advertising community. But that has never bothered Dixon Schwabl because the company simply does not belong to local advertising organizations such as the Rochester Advertising Federation or the Ad Club of Rochester. This approach may have caused it to lose the highly visible United Way Campaign assignment a year ago when the new client contact at United Way remembered the DS disdain for the Ad Club when she had been at that organization. It also costs the agency by denying employees the benefits that come with interaction with a larger group of industry peers. Both organizations offer seminar and learning opportunities throughout the year. And the Ad Club—with its charitable, public service orientation—would seem to be an obvious fit for a company that prides itself on charity.

The environment from which Dixon Schwabl draws its employees is a little more wide open than typical ad agencies, which draw mainly from other advertising firms. DS is likely to hire client-side personnel as account executives and would willingly hire designers with little or no ad agency experience but who learned their trade at packaging companies, printers and other service bureaus. A former high school English and history teacher is now the firm's lead copywriter. DS hired the girlfriend of a senior Frontier marketing executive to service the Frontier account. Dixon Schwabl also "grows its own" with an active and energetic internship program that occasionally results in a job offer to a participating student.

But whether they are experienced advertising people or new hires out of college, people hit the ground running, with no training or company orientation program. This is significant because of the company's relatively high turnover in personnel—16 out of 54 people have left the company since July 2006 (Dixon Schwabl, 2006). People who come into the company end up getting fragmented or task specific training from someone who has in turn not been there very long. As a result, there are numerous work styles, project input systems, and methods for resolving problems.

While there are many ways to work, the company tends to stick to tried and true solutions. It urges visitors to its conference room to "think outside the box" but it has become very comfortable with the basic marketing approaches on which it was built. Dixon Schwabl has over the years developed several styles of "solution" that it repeatedly and consistently recommends to new clients. These include simple three-part "reasons to buy" direct mail series, pocket folders with step-down information sheets. It prefers consumer

and retail clients to business-to-business accounts. Although it uses electronic mail “eblasts” is not yet comfortable working or recommending more sophisticated Web solutions or CRM (Customer Relationship Management) programs.

The Agency Recommends/Prefers

- 3-part direct mail campaigns
- 15 and 30-second radio and TV campaigns
- Pocket folders for sales presentations or customer information
- Logo redesign projects
- Special events and parties
- Company or dealership newsletters
- Public relations retainer clients
- Price-off offers
- 8-minute videos
- Internally generated photography/stock photography

The Agency Avoids

- Integrated sales promotion programs
- Self liquidator or premiums
- Continuity programs
- Technical advertising and other communications
- Corporate advertising
- Sales meetings
- Business-to-business or “trade” advertising
- Outside photographic resources
- Outside production resources

Dixon Schwabl continually defends its competitive position with a combination of price competitiveness and fast turn-around. A client with an inconceivably fast due date can be reasonably comfortable that he or she will receive little push back, or requests for extended deadlines. And while this may be good for the various clients’ short-term peace of mind, it can create havoc on the creative department.

Taking a “contingency” view of the agency reveals turbulence, (Appendix: R6). Defender characteristics are clear in the areas of the strategic and managerial where management has lately exhibited a shift toward a more authoritarian or Theory X style of management. In fact, DS is the only advertising agency I’ve ever encountered that’s attempted to implement a “probation” program for what it saw as underperforming or misguided employees. The irony is that there are no clear workplace rules or

reasons why one ends being placed on probation. In one instance, a young graphic artist was put on probation based solely on the opinion of an senior account service person that he wasn't working fast enough on her business. Another woman who admitted to a hangover following an agency party and ended up on probation.

In the employee motivation area and structural areas, the company moves a little to the right in defender/prospector typology. However, the fact that virtually every account team has a different way of working makes it difficult for media, production and creative personnel to develop a consistent work style or routine. It has been observed that working at Dixon Schwabl is like working for lots of little mini agencies.

Culture and Character: Fun To Do Good Work?

Like virtually every advertising agency of size or significance, Dixon Schwabl's culture is dominated by the relationship between its account and creative functions. A second and equally important factor is the relationship between the agency and its clients.

A DS art director with 7 years experience at the company told me on several occasions "rather than being an advertising business that sells its services, this is essentially a sales organization that happens to sell advertising." The distinction is significant, too. Dixon Schwabl's "make it happen" slogan borrows the emotional uplift of a bold can-do statement in a way that might inspire creatives, but it also promises a get-it-done at all costs delivery ethic to the client. In the past year, there have been frequent times when design and other art staff work well into the night or give up their weekends. Mechanical artists and designers sweat amidst the casual, playful agency surroundings. People miss out when the ice cream truck that comes at 3 pm on Thursdays (during warmer weather) because they are concerned about getting done with work before the day care center closes. Writers are often forced to set aside one rush job to accommodate a rush job that has a louder more assertive account executive behind it. Lack of planning or workflow management also results occasionally in extended periods of near inactivity where people begin to wonder whether an account has been lost or if business is slowing down.

As a marketing organization, Dixon Schwabl is naturally “extroverted”. In a recent presentation by *Companies Are People Too*, DS’s corporate Myers-Briggs personality type was shown to be ENFP—only a letter variance from my own personal type of ENTP (Appendix: R11, CAPT documents). But I should point out that when I completed the Organizational Character index for the company, DS scored as an ESFP.

Themed “Fun To Do Good Work” the event showed how the accounting people were primarily introverted while the account service staff was extraverted and how people in other departments had people of remarkable similar types. It was intriguing to note that a large group of the creative department (primarily males in the department) had the same personality type as Mike Schwabl (ENFP) while a number of females (primarily account executives plus the new creative director) had the same personality type as Lauren Dixon (ESTJ).

Companies Are People Too Scoring of the Dixon Schwabl Personality

E	N	F	P
90 % Extroverted	70 % Intuitive	80% Feeling	65% Perceiving
Strongly Extroverted	Decidedly Intuitive	Strongly Feeling	Decidedly Perceiving

David Rohr Scoring of the Dixon Schwabl Personality

E	S	F	P
23	14	23	24
Nearly Neutral	Strongly Sensing	Nearly Neutral	Nearly neutral

E vs. I. Dixon Schwabl clearly shows many of the personality traits of an *extroverted* organization laid out by Bridges (2000). Meetings became more and more frequent during my time at the company—to the point where I believe they were a substitute for actual work. And there has always been a strong tendency to rely on spoken communications although email advisories and mandates for action had become more frequent.

Parties are frequent and the company creates numerous reasons for celebration internally. Curiously however, many of its largest parties exclude attendance by spouses. And there are examples of a

strong *introverted* streak within the firm. Among these is the company's lack of involvement with the larger advertising community either through the American Association of Advertising Agencies or the local organizations mentioned earlier. Another incongruity with the rest of the advertising world is the fact that Dixon Schwabl never shows its work. Whereas almost every other agency highlights its creative work in websites, office walls, conference room displays and agency video presentations, DS never displays examples of its creative.

Dixon Schwabl has a natural tendency to seek input from external sources, continually interfacing with media, printing, and direct marketing vendors on behalf of its clients. However not all of these interaction are seen as positive. A Xerox representative who was invited to present "digital possibilities" to the company, recently described the experience as one of the strangest in her career. "They were asking me a lot of questions but then disagreeing with me when I gave them answers. I was there to explain what our technology could do for them and they didn't really want to hear anything more than their own assumptions."

S vs. N. The company's culture exhibits both *sensing* and *intuitive* characteristics. Intuitive characteristics would include the interest in emerging trends and a strong belief in its own creativity. Mike Schwabl—to his credit—genuinely believes that he has the world's best art department. The company might also be careless with what it sees as routines. Yet I find DS to be much more sensing than one might imagine a creative organization to be. Its reliance on a limited range of solutions is an indication of preference for both "trust in experience" and routine, (Appendix: R11, R12).

DS also has a work style that usually makes proper interaction between writers and art directors difficult. Jobs frequently come in so fast with such immediate deadlines that time to brainstorm is non-existent. One tendency that raises questions about the merits of cross-functionality is the account service desire to frequently cross into the creative realm. This seems to be tolerated because the most meddlesome account people are valued by Dixon and Schwabl because of their seniority and loyalty.

F vs. T. Dixon Schwabl clearly sees itself as the feeling company. At the presentation by Companies Are People Too people universally agreed that Dixon Schwabl fit the feeling mold thoroughly.

Employee's children are generally welcomed during weather emergencies, when daycare becomes suddenly unavailable and after hours. They can play on the large spiral slide or enjoy the impressive goldfish pond. DS projects appreciation of its people and has been accommodating towards peoples' lives outside work. The company is comfortable with what it knows and how it feels about itself. But consistent with "feeling," the *company values what it cares about not necessarily what is logical* (Appendix: R11).

The feeling vs. thinking criteria is one where here is a discord between the two principals in this area as Lauren Dixon is a "T" and Mike Schwabl an "F." Many of the account team (largely female) is also "T" while many of the males in the creative department are "F." This perhaps the most clear reflection of the owners' hiring habits. But overall, harmony in the office is valued to a fault. People try to get along and compliment one another's work. Correcting a person for rudeness or inconsideration is seen as worse than the initial affront. There is however a downside to this in that issues that genuinely need to be communicated either don't get said or come off as being the words of a recalcitrant or malcontent. The preservation of harmony ultimately serves the overall aims of "thinkers" here who are largely ESTJ.

P vs. J. This area is where I feel my personality is most closely aligned to the overall Dixon Schwabl personality—but most at odds with a significant and powerful group within the organization. And, on balance, I think that this discord is why my enthusiasm for the company waned significantly over the last 9 months. The company has exhibited a growing tendency toward judging characteristics, consistent with what I see as shift toward Theory X management. It recently promoted a young designer/art director to the role of creative director, leaving many senior creatives (and some account people) disillusioned by this person's tendency to be brutish one on one but cheerleading and congratulatory in "all-company" memos.

Key components within the agency are most comfortable with meeting assignment deadlines and budget pressures than they are in accomplishing real or significant benefits on behalf of the clients. New and innovative creative approaches are rarely sought out. The "J" account people see the deadline or budget requirement as key, whereas the perceiving component of the agency has a generally unsatisfied hunger to innovate. And because the agency does not do "post analysis" of why projects succeed or fail, the argument is rarely brought to conclusion. But this is something the company should look closely at. In the

past 18 months it has lost long-term accounts like Hoselton Auto Group and Wilson Farms. And it fails in most of the pitches where it competes against other ad agencies.

Politics Impacting Performance

During my first four months at DixonSchwabl I had discovered a unique and positive work environment. There were hardly any exits either voluntary or by firing. The second thing I noticed is that there were very few instances of people closing their office doors.

My arrival also coincided with a welcome revival of fortunes for the company, which had just undergone some turbulence in which it had to lay off nearly a dozen employees. Two months after joining DS, I played a large role in helping the company gain the Finger Lakes Gaming and Racetrack account. It was also enjoying a resurgence of business it thought it had lost from Frontier. Here, in my view, was a seemingly apolitical organization living in a world of increasing prosperity.

But over time it became clear that there were a number of political organizations within the company at the same time many people went about their work in an entirely apolitical way. Dixon Schwabl like many companies Gareth Morgan (2006) observes was essentially a coalition of coalitions. For example the account service team on Frontier was very close and tended to align themselves with those creative people they felt were best at helping them meet their immediate needs.

Within the creative group, there were several coalitions of writers/art directors and/or production people. Evidence of these appears in the way people tend to team themselves on projects and extends into conversation during downtime, lunch and out-of-office activities. Some coalitions developed simply as part of a strategy to survive and enjoy the work (Appendix: R8, Power and Influence Paper).

The company is also unitary in the way power is exercised. This is particularly evident in the area of "conflict" where disagreement is avoided at all costs. The most noteworthy political phenomenon is the dynamic surrounding gender. With an employee ratio that varies consistently between 2/3 and 3/4 female, this is a place where women are welcome and where many exercise significant power. Although a couple smaller department heads are male (accounting, production and media), it is safe to say that 6 of the 7 most

powerful people in the company are women. And although power is not something that is forcefully exerted at Dixon Schwabl, it is a quiet but strong undercurrent that has produced an invisible rulebook.

Excerpts From The Informal Rulebook of Dixon Schwabl

- Raises don't come often so make sure you hardly ever ask
- Don't question the client's decision even though he employs the agency for the advice and counsel you are there to provide
- Avoid being the bearer of unpleasant news or you will be associated with the unpleasantness
- Speaking highly of others on your team is a great way to draw positive attention to yourself
- Maintain the notion that this is a really, really great place to work
- Keep your conversation positive even when the reality of a situation isn't
- Never wear blue jeans to work

Although there is nothing in these unwritten rules of the political organization that one can specifically tie to being a female-dominant organization, it is easy to find some of the female stereotypes outlined by Morgan fitting well with this rulebook. These include the qualities of cooperation and being a "loyal supporter and follower."

One thing that I had begun to do—consistent with my title—was to push for was the implementation of better project input systems. And I was working on a Dixon Schwabl training program for new account and creative people. It was my belief that a little standardization could have brought a lot of relief to a company frequently overworked by "reinventing the wheel" with every new project or input document, (Appendix: R8, Political Processes...). It may seem incongruous to offer "procedure" as a way to enhance creativity but in my observation, this is exactly what the company needs in small, but smartly implemented doses. This sort of structure and organization would help cure some of the negative politics that follows misunderstanding, missed deadlines and lost opportunity (see Recommendations; R12,). Missteps frequently generate the kind of unwelcome butterfly effect discussed in class.

In analyzing the agency's political organization it is clear that the lack of formalized structure and hard reporting relationships combines with the varied or non-existent workflow process to magnify the importance of politics. Characteristics like sensible job input, project changes, timetable and other work/process improvements could genuinely enhance not only the internal environment of the company but improve the creative output. Some however see the main resistance to this as coming from the very top.

And to date, Lauren Dixon's new business energies have been enough to make up for a generally weak creative product. The larger advertising community as well as many people in the Dixon Schwabl creative department view the agency's high-pressure, fast-turn work style as a genuine impediment to quality and. Some have even observed that the agency does enough other things well that it does not really need to have a particularly strong creative product.

But I don't believe this. Creative is the heart and soul of the business and genuine originality in creative can not only help build brands but also significantly magnify the recognition of established brands (Pieters et al, 2002). If Lauren Dixon and Mike Schwabl ever want to have a business that is transferable—as in saleable or that can be passed to employees or their children—they will have to build an organization that succeeds independent of their convincing personalities. For an advertising agency this means a creative product that is known for an ability to consistently surprise and inspire-both in the marketplace and in the larger advertising community.

Dixon Schwabl's Ability To Learn And Adapt To Change.

Organizational learning at Dixon Schwabl consists primarily of the personal learning of the employees there. If one were to view the situation in holographic terms, the company would essentially lose part of its brain whenever an employee leaves. This can be a significant problem in a business where your inventory rests solely in the intelligence and talents of your employees. Departures from the agency can leave holes in the fabric or organizational knowledge and skill, which can't easily be replaced (Scalzo, 2006).

However, there are two things that enhance Dixon Schwabl's potential as a learning organization. The first is the nature of the advertising business. The demand of numerous clients from a range of industries forces a double-loop process. No single project is alike—from the inputs from the client to the ultimate objective or execution. Changes in strategy on an ad campaign might produce a requirement to generate more immediate sales, which might in turn force the company to look at a more immediate solution such as including a premium, offering a price reduction or creating an online offer or event, or other tactics.

This might, in turn, inspire groups or individuals within the agency to sharpen their expertise in an area with an eye for using the new knowledge in the future for other clients.

Another factor that strengthens the company's ability to become a learning organization is the natural curiosity of the owners. This high-level commitment, essential to organizational learning (Lumpkin, 2005) is further enhanced by a large group of creative employees/managers with personal commitments to learning, skills enhancement and workplace improvement (Appendix: LOPP Summary). These characteristics help to temper any natural egocentric tendencies of the firm. Although DS has shielded itself from the larger advertising community, it has counter balanced this to some extent with involvement in various programs such as that offered by Companies Are People Too and a fairly recent implementation of a software program to track job progress, monitor employee time and facilitate budgeting and billing.

Recommendations For Change

Dixon Schwabl has a terrific opportunity to transform itself from being a high-pressure company with a "sweatshop" reputation to a genuine leader in creating both great creative and a being a great place to work. My recommendations are for **1) Process standardization, 2) Consistent new employee orientation, 3) Regular performance appraisals tied to raises and 4) Joining the larger advertising community.** Each recommendation supports at least three of the various images the DS organization.

Process Standardization. The company desperately needs to bring some standardization to its procedures. This is perhaps the biggest obstacle to overcome, too, but it is one that will ultimately do the most good. Even the implementation of a consistent, standardized creative brief (see appendix) would make input for every project and provide a yardstick by which creative and account service personnel can measure the work in the end. Other procedure standardization should include a better set of generally agreeable timetables for completion of various types of work. Ultimately, this will build a more creative organization because it will concentrate the account personnel's efforts on providing proper input rather than

worrying or second-guessing the results of their sparse or unfocused input. Lauren Dixon herself should lead the effort or the account service personnel will not take it seriously. This recommendation will benefit:

- **Structure:** Creating a more efficient organization will lead to better stronger account service by giving creative people consistent, well-written documentation of client needs and opportunities.
- **Environment:** A better creative product will improve harmony between the agency and its clients. The agency's creative reputation will improve. Talented creative personnel will make DS a first choice for sending their resumes (along with Rochester's Other leading agencies Partners & Napier, Roberts Communication and Martino Flynn).
- **Culture:** Well-organized project input and communications will improve understanding and responsiveness among all the personality types at DS now and in the future.
- **Politics:** The vacuum of understanding will be filled, enabling a reduction of negative politics.

Consistent new employee orientation. Implementation of new employee training would go a long way toward establishing the ideal a workplace that everyone understands. My proposal would involve inputs from current employees on the joys and heartaches of joining the company. It might even include use of Myers-Briggs at the get-go so that new employees can become familiar with the ideal that ""companies are people too." This would include giving each new hire a mentor (not his or her boss/"go to" person). Interns would get a "late" version of this. This recommendation will benefit:

- **Structure:** The agency does not really need substantial changes to its structure. But fostering a good understanding of what the agency is, how it works and what it hopes to achieve will help to make the agency's relatively flat, non-bureaucratic organization more efficient and productive.
- **Environment:** A unique learning, training program is something that could place the agency in wonderful standing with the community from which it draws clients and new hires.
- **Culture:** This will help the agency maximize the inherent advantages of its extroverted and perceiving natures by giving it an employee corps that began with a good understanding of their roles rather than the difficulties that accompany misunderstanding and missteps.
- **Learning:** The agency will not only orient the new hires in a welcoming/non-threatening way it will help to re-educate, or reinvigorate the existing staff.
- **Politics:** Over time, there will be less reliance on an unwritten rulebook thanks to the fact that everyone has learned the same systems and values taught, shared and encouraged by the same people.

Regular performance appraisals with salary increases tied to those appraisals. This fundamental practice—prevalent in nearly every organization of size or significance—would do the agency a world of good because employees would have a constant sense of their value to the agency and the rewards that accompany it. This recommendation will benefit:

- Structure: Giving employees a good sense of their role and what is expected will facilitate the performance of what is essentially a very flat, hybrid structure. It will also alleviate the need for much of the current method of feedback--“warnings.”
- Environment: The improved reputation that results from treating people well will result in more resumes from high quality prospective employees plus bolster the company’s reputation among the advertising community as a whole.
- Culture: None of the complimentary personality characteristics of individuals or the company as a whole can possibly benefit from misunderstanding or lack of clarity. Regular reviews bolstered by the power of incentive will be transformational—giving everyone a sense of where they stand with the agency owners and management plus a feeling that they have a stake in company success.
- Politics. Clearer understanding of where one stands with the management will mean less reliance on the informal (and not always positive) political systems for feedback.
- Learning: Creating a system of regular appraisal and reward will create a sense of an ongoing conversation between company management and individual employees. It is safe to say that the process—done right—will create a double-loop on both sides. Management could gain insights about day-to-day challenges that people face and methods to improve the work environment.

Joining the wider advertising community: Membership in well-known, national organizations like the American Association Of Advertising Agencies as well as the Rochester Advertising Federation and Ad Club of Rochester can provide numerous opportunities for employee and management learning and career enrichment, plus expose the company to valuable information on how other agencies meet challenges, improve processes, and foster interdepartmental harmony. Curiously, despite the agency’s resistance to joining the advertising organizations, it maintains significant presence in the local Public Relations Society of America. The company is large enough so that it could be a significant player in either of the two Rochester organizations as soon as it joins. This recommendation will benefit:

- Environment: Most company vendors already belong to the local advertising groups, as do clients and potential clients. Involvement in either (or ideally both) local organization could be important from both a public relations standpoint as well as provide access to new business opportunities.
- Culture: Many events and activities sponsored by the local clubs are of an enjoyable, social nature and would fit in perfectly goal of being a company where it is “fun to do good work.”
- Learning: The local organizations and the national AAAA provide numerous resources for individual and team improvement. AAAA is well known for its resources, learning opportunities, conferences and other assistance to senior management. Group involvement in everything from attendance at 2-day seminars to local appearances by industry icons (which happen fairly regularly) will build a sense of teamwork.

Conclusion

The owners and other management personnel at Dixon Schwabl have long held out their company as a forward-looking, employee-friendly company. And this is consistent with what the President of Companies

Are People Too described as the agency's personality of being a place where it is "fun to do good work." Yet this is an assessment that left many in attendance questioning the reality of what was presented. After all, a company where it is genuinely "fun to do good work" probably doesn't experience 30% employee turnover (16 of 54 people) in only nine months. The company that Dixon Schwabl is most comfortable being (for now) is one that permits organizational turbulence and discord, using cheerleading and other superficial solutions as a salve. What it really needs is complete, systematic change in several areas (Appendix: R12).

My recommendations are based on my experience with the agency, the insights of Management 515 and years of experience in seeing what works and what doesn't work for advertising companies. All could be implemented easily and inexpensively within a one-year period and beyond. The agency's more sensing nature (my evaluation) may mean that it needs to implement the recommendations in a phased approach (Appendix: R11, R12). In that case, I would start with recommendation 1 (process standardization) or 3 (regular performance appraisals tied to raises) followed by the remaining three in order (2,3,4 or 1, 2, 4). Recommendation 4 could begin at any time but it is something the agency will probably be more comfortable once it is adjusted to the other three.

These recommendations are generally well matched to the company's various natures and the business in which it competes. All are practiced in some degree by almost every effective organization. I genuinely believe they will result in a taking the "fun" past being a mere slogan, "ice cream Thursdays" or an approach to interior décor. People will ultimately be happier doing their work and Dixon Schwabl will finally be the company that it really wants to be.