

Top Ten Ways To Achieve High-Performance Green Design

by Peter A. Levasseur, AIA, LEED AP

In today's world with an increasing focus on the dangers of global warming, interior and architecture projects challenge all involved professionals to constantly do more with less, to provide high-level success in less time, and to raise the bar while simultaneously minimizing cost and resource usage. The buzzword today is to build with "sustainability," yet if you look closely at the way most projects today are celebrated, many teams, perhaps, merely self-proclaim a "sustainable" approach as a consideration in their projects. But, is every project really that environmentally friendly? Is it really cutting edge and revolutionary, or is it just well-presented and in touch with the current trends of the 21st century?

I find myself asking these questions more and more in my own work and in others' work. I find it crucial to identify and excel at the most critical elements of any project to create high-performance interior spaces instead of falling prey to the trends that satisfy today's buzzwords for our industry.

I am fortunate to work in a firm that seeks out both high-performance architecture projects and high-performance interior design projects. In the past year, I have worked directly on four LEED certification projects: two for new construction certifications and two for commercial interiors certifications. Looking back at these successes, and the most successful of the four, I have created a "David Letterman-style Top Ten List" for creating high-performance green interior space (regardless of your role on the project). In descending order of importance, others may want to consider the following "Top Ten" on their next project:

10. Perform due diligence
09. Balance design with environmental strategy
08. Set the bar high
07. Know that you can succeed
06. Help your owner to understand commitment
05. Identify goals to *all*, daily
04. Be willing to innovate
03. Practice smart budget management

02. Use collaboration as a key to innovation

01. Maintain a positive mental attitude

Combined, these ten elements profile critical issues in integrated sustainable design to more easily address, adapt, and overcome design project challenges. All ten play a role in ensuring success on a project where detours can (and will) occur, from staff turnover to LEED credit changes to product substitutions and owner budget realignments. Flexibility is critical from start to finish. Below I explain my Top Ten and provide a playbook aimed to help you succeed on your next project:

►**10. Due Diligence.** From the time the owner conceives a need for new space until the certificate of occupancy, my typical interior projects average around 36 months. Think about where you were exactly three years ago. Where will you be three years from today? It is important to recognize the rapid change in our business.

Since business is so fluid, Due Diligence is critical to any project's success. Products change or discontinue, people change positions, owner contacts change, and the construction climate changes.

The qualities of a high-performance space, however, remain fairly constant. Conceptual ideas on aesthetics, durability, natural resources, toxic chemicals, waste generation, and value are about the same now as they were 15 years ago when I entered this profession. It's the specifics that keep changing.

For example, our industry is much more sensitive now to a specific product, polyvinyl chloride (PVC), than it was 15 years ago, but we still install walls, windows, ceiling systems, furniture similar to the way we did it 15 years ago. Due Diligence is about follow through. Simply requesting no PVC use on a job is easy. If the owner says, "There will be no PVC on my project," the designers specify products without PVC, the product reps listen, the sub-contractors do not substitute PVC products, and owner's mainte-



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nance staff use no PVC later when the product is eventually replaced, then due diligence has occurred.

Due Diligence for great design is ongoing and much more rewarding and successful when held as a constant throughout the churn and ups and downs of any project.

►**9. Balance Design With Environmental Strategy.** In my office, I am often called "Mr. Green." I have a passion for helping young designers, building owners, and even our evening cleaning crew understand the importance of LEED and caring for our environment. Others in the office are considered "the designer" and are asked, "Is this the right color for this room?" or "Can you mix traditional detailing with contemporary in this space?" All of us have been pigeon-holed by stereotyping.

On a successful LEED or integrated project, both design and environmental innovation happen simultaneously. The best thing about green design in 2007 is that product manufacturers (the fabulous ones) allow a team to make both design and environmental innovation decisions simultaneously. I may be stereotyped "Mr. Green" in my office, but deep down I design as I select, specify, and hold on to those products that overlap both qualities and achieve LEED credits.

... Top Ten, *Cont'd from page 10*

When I look back at projects that thrive with LEED, they always involve design and environmental innovation simultaneously. LEED succeeds when great design overlaps environmental sensitivity with exciting, refreshing interior design innovation.

►8. **Set The Bar High.** We all get nervous that everything will cost too much whenever we set the bar high. But achieving excellence requires cost excellence. When you buy a new car, you know your budget so you seek the best car you can buy within your budget. That's just smart thinking.

When a client hires us, one factor they consider is our ability to apply excellence within their budget: Push them to achieve excellence while maintaining the project budget.

LEED can be worked into that quest for excellence, just overlap it efficiently into the entire process. If the budget only allows for an economy design and you exceed expectations, you will always find rewarding work with that client, and most likely with others, too.

►7. **Know That You Can Succeed.** LEED for commercial interiors or new construction is daunting at first light on any project, whether you are the client, the builder, or the designer. Admit it and move on from that initial reaction. Within LEED, you will find easy strategies that you already have done on previous projects. Then, you identify the project challenges you must overcome. Know that you can succeed and push yourself. Once the easy strategies are confirmed, excel at the challenges. And constantly remind yourself that there is a big difference between confidence and cockiness.

►6. **Owner Who Understands Commitment.** The owner is the most critical player in any project. If they hire you as their designer, they expect you to commit to the project and focus on their unique requirements and opportunities. Challenge them to raise their bar and commit to a successful project with them. Yes, it requires intense communication. Yes, it requires follow-up. And yes, it requires understanding and intellect. But I have yet to meet a client that did not do their best to commit to my ideas when they truly understood that my idea created value for them.

►5. **Identify Goals To All, Daily.** You may think that goal-setting is a waste of time, but goals that differ among team members cause stress, miscommunication, and omissions. You can never completely detail every issue on a project, but considering primary goals daily and reinforcing them within your team will help make a successful project and overcome countless details until the excitement of owner occupancy. Even though some goals may waiver and fall away, set critical goals and reinforce the ones you know are critical to your vision.

►4. **Be Willing To Innovate.** Every project, every client, and every contractor has background, a typical way of proceeding. A leader identifies the right place to innovate and rise above the norm of business as usual. Risk is a challenge we all face daily, but innovation makes design exciting. You will surprise yourself with what you can overcome and achieve by not just repeating your last design. Innovation is fun, it is intense, and it is the best part of design. Encourage those around you to seek out innovative solutions with you at any budget level!

►3. **Smart Budget Management.** In design, we redo things too often because we do not manage our budgets. Many jobs that have incredible ideas fall short in value engineering or during budget realignment. Maintaining design integrity through budget changes is challenging and extremely rewarding when the paint dries and the occupants finally move in, provided that you hold on to that most important idea. Tackle that burden, because a dream existing only on paper is extremely frustrating to your design psyche. Get it built and learn from its existence.

►2. **Collaboration As A Key To Innovation.** Gone is the day of the egotistical design talent. Yes, a great designer knows when to be stubborn on an issue, but every project goes much further by bringing out the best in the entire team. You can't solve every priority required in your own head, but you can come closest to optimal solutions if you use collaboration opportunities with all the players involved in the project. In 2007, every project has many contributors with many priorities. When it comes to teamwork, 1+1 is always greater than 2.

►1. **Positive Mental Attitude.** Never underestimate the value of seeing the glass as half-full. Positive thinking can make all the difference on the road to high-performance green design. And don't forget to laugh when you fail, but then learn from that failure.

As **Thomas Edison** said, "A great idea takes 1% innovation and 99% perspiration." To succeed, you must overcome your failures by finding a solution with dedication, often by identifying why other ideas failed. Use a positive mental attitude to turn failures into your greatest vision.

It is often easier, especially in today's fast-track business and construction world, to give up and move on using a mediocre solution. If you want that half-full glass to be as good as you feel it really should be, push yourself to fill that glass until it spills over the rim. Keeping a positive mental attitude will help you get there.

This Top Ten list evolved following my work on **SCA America's Headquarters** in Philadelphia's Cira Centre and three other LEED-certified projects while at EwingCole. SCA is a global consumer goods and paper company that develops and produces paper products nearly exclusively from renewable and recyclable materials in more than 90 countries. SCA is on the global 100 list of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development. Its Philadelphia office occupies three floors of the Cira Centre and received a LEED Gold Certification in 2006.

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Peter A. Levasseur, AIA, LEED AP is the Director of Sustainable Design for Philadelphia-based EwingCole, a nationally recognized, fully-integrated architecture, engineering, interior design, and planning firm of more than 350 professionals. He has over 15 years of project experience with sustainable design and has completed projects for the US Naval Academy, the Washington DC Navy Yard, Andrews Air Force Base, the National Gallery of Art, and Liberty Science Center. Mr. Levasseur currently is a Board Member of the Delaware Valley Green Building Council and he presents new concepts and approaches on sustainable design at national conferences. He can be reached at plevasseur@ewingcole.com. Visit www.ewingcole.com for more information.