



**Timothy Haahs
& Associates, Inc.**

doing well by

doing good



A cello lesson in the Calvary Vision Community Center (above), built by two-time heart transplant recipient Timothy Haahs (top).

ourteen years ago, Timothy H. Haahs, P.E., spent six months in a hospital waiting for a heart transplant. Only in his 30s and in the midst of a successful engineering career, Haahs spent much of that time reflecting on his life. With his future very much in doubt, regrets over people he had hurt and things he had said came to the fore.

"All my achievements didn't mean much," Haahs recalls. "I realized that life was about serving others."

After recovering from the surgery, Haahs's new outlook on life led him to leave his corporate employer and establish a firm that would encompass his new sense of purpose. Today, Timothy Haahs & Associates, Inc., now a 50-person firm, puts the founder's values squarely in the center of its existence. According to the firm's mission statement, "We exist to help those in need. We emphasize assisting those medical, religious, and charitable organizations (as well as individuals) directly involved with helping the less fortunate."

This translates not only into the firm and employees donating money and volunteering time to charities, but also in providing design services that "are not merely adequate, but distinguished." The firm's mission, Haahs believes, makes it a more desirable place to work.

"When people sense that there is a greater purpose to what they do, it gives them the extra desire to work harder and more efficiently," says Haahs. "People just enjoy being here." (Haahs himself can certainly appreciate "being here," after his first heart transplant failed and he had to undergo a second transplant seven years later.)

Haahs attributes the firm's sense of purpose as the main reason turnover is remarkably low. While some employees have been let go for poor performance, and some have left the industry, in the last 12 years, only two employees have left the firm for a position at another design firm, he says.



'Servant leadership': key to advancement

At Timothy Haahs & Associates, Inc., the path to principal can only come through these "servant leadership" principles:

- ▶ **Putting other people's needs before your own.**
- ▶ **Understanding that life is about what you give, rather than what you get.**
- ▶ **Servant leadership is a question of the heart.**
- ▶ **People with humility don't think less of themselves; they just think less about themselves.**
- ▶ **People with humility don't deny their power; they just recognize that it passes through them, not from them.**

The firm's culture of helping others is evident inside the office as well as outside of it, says vice president Todd Helmer. "When you need help professionally or personally, people are there for you," he says.

This spirit is best exemplified by a story Haahs tells concerning his efforts to assist a struggling employee. The employee's performance had deteriorated to the point where most firms would have fired him, Haahs says. Rather than take that step, Haahs, who believed personal issues were the employee's chief problem, offered him a two-month paid leave. Seeing great potential in the individual, Haahs says he wanted to give him a chance to turn things around.

Haahs had one stipulation: The employee had to visit him for a couple of hours a week in the evening to chat. This informal counseling did a world of good. "Today, he is one of our stars," Haahs says. Although Haahs's solution was a gamble, he points out that it also made good business sense in the end. A new hire would have taken at least six months to get up to speed, costing more money than a paid two-month leave.

Developing human potential

For a firm of its size, TimHaahs has impressive career development programs. Five percent of the firm's 2006 budget was spent on internal and external training.

A new program, called TimHaahs University, uses the resources of the firm's employees to teach a variety of industry-related topics. The curriculum includes required courses and electives, with an emphasis on ongoing training in key areas. The program not only raises the ability of staff members, it also cements closer bonds between them.



The firm aims to help employees, particularly younger ones, navigate the best career path for themselves. “There’s nothing worse than having employees not know where they’re headed,” says Helmer.

The Pathway to Principal program focuses on the nontechnical qualities of leadership. This mentoring initiative helps ambitious young employees understand what it takes to become a principal at TimHaahs, including outlining the keys to this goal in a formal document. Executives discuss issues such as embracing the firm’s core values, influencing others, and taking ownership of all responsibilities. These qualities require conscientiousness in day-to-day activities, such as returning client phone calls promptly and going the extra mile for clients.

“It’s about character building, how to handle pressures in life, and how to approach challenges,” Haahs says. Employees that aspire to take on the responsibilities of leadership are assigned a mentor who addresses these issues.

More informal mentoring is also commonplace. “Even if a person is not quite ready to handle a particular task, we like to get

them exposed to things as much as we can,” Helmer says. That could mean taking a junior-level staffer to client meetings to observe how the business really works. To make it easier to keep track of who can benefit from this type of attention, managers have a spreadsheet database of employees’ skills and expertise. This document helps guide the firm’s informal mentoring, Helmer says.

The firm embraces the “servant leadership” model that makes everyone, even top executives, accountable to everyone else in the firm. “Nobody is better than anybody else,” Helmer says. “Tim could be reporting [on a project or initiative] to someone two levels below me.”

The firm’s headquarters in Blue Bell, Pa., outside Philadelphia, is co-located with the Calvary Vision Community Center, which houses the Calvary Vision Church, a nonprofit daycare facility, and an auditorium/conference center. The firm built the community center, which is available to nonprofit and charitable organizations at no cost for special events, fundraisers, and meetings. The firm intends to develop similar facilities in conjunction with its new offices.

TimHaahs employees can send their children to the daycare facility at a reduced rate. This offers peace of mind for the employees who take advantage of this benefit, Helmer says.

In recent years, firm leaders have put increasing emphasis on growth largely for the benefit of the staff. “As we grew, the board felt obligated to grow for them,” Helmer says. “We didn’t want to put a ceiling over anybody’s head.”

Two years ago, the firm opened its first satellite office in Miami. Six months ago, it opened an Atlanta office. It will take time for these offices to build up a thriving practice, Helmer says, but as this happens, opportunities for advancement will multiply. TimHaahs has enjoyed rapid growth over the past several years, with staff increasing from 21 in 2003 to over 50 today.

With an expertise in parking garages and mixed-use structures, the firm is expanding its breadth of services to include mixed-use development and master planning. The firm’s clients are primarily in the medical, educational, corporate, and government sectors. The client base mixes well with the firm’s overall mission. “When clients have a mission statement like ours, it helps us develop a rapport with them,” says Helmer.

Timothy Haahs & Associates’ mission, reflected throughout the company’s personnel policies, culture, and work, is a winning formula for business success and employee morale. It proves doing good work can pay off financially and in personal fulfillment. **BD+C**

— Peter Fabris, Contributing Editor

TimHaahs

ENGINEERS ARCHITECTS

More Highlights at TimHaahs

- › Tuition reimbursement is available for courses relevant to an employee’s job responsibilities.
- › The Tier Above Award is given annually to an employee who “has gone above and beyond” what is asked of him or her.
- › Company-sponsored lunches are provided every Monday and Friday.
- › Company retreat and family outing is an annual event with a group activity and meal.
- › TimHaahs Improvement Memo (known as T.I.M.) is a vehicle to channel employee suggestions directly to the president for faster resolution and implementation.
- › The firm is a major sponsor of the American Heart Association’s “Heartwalk” in Philadelphia and supports AHA’s “Go Red for Women” campaign.
- › Employees give time and donations to more than 30 organizations, notably Toys for Tots, a winter coat campaign, and Philadelphia’s food drive.