



ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

PRAGMATIC DESIGN

Q1: RESILIENT SECURITY



Adaptive Leadership

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WATG's Margaret McMahon offers keys to staying strong, listening well and holding onto the heart and soul of design.

DesignIntelligence (DI): Let's start by level-setting our discussion. Please share a little bit about your background. As the global head of interiors for WATG and Wimberly for decades, you've seen a lot, but who were your mentors?

Margaret McMahon (MM): After majoring in political science with a criminal justice major, my original plan was to go to law school and become a lawyer. After spending an entire summer windsurfing and waiting for my father to give the green light on funding my continuing education, my mother (whom I realized later was my first mentor) finally put an end to my fun and games. She realized I had no Plan B and recommended I try various jobs to figure out what I wanted to do. Back in 1982, Kelly Services was THE temp agency in New York. I could type and cut mat board and that landed me a temp job at Trisha Wilson & Associates. There I helped put a presentation together for the Bankers Trust offices in Cairo, Egypt, and the rest is history. I took classes at night at Parsons and worked my way up to eventually run the New York office. My second great mentor is Trisha Wilson, who saw something in me I did not see myself. I worked for her for over 30 years. On a professional level, she taught me everything I know. On a personal level, she was with me when both my parents died when I was 25, when I got married and stood by me like a sister — just an amazing person.

DI: How did you get to WATG?

MM: Twelve years ago, I was approached by what I thought was a potential client but turned out to be a headhunter for WATG. I realized I'd done everything I could in building the New York office for Wilson. The company structure was changing, and I felt I needed a change and a challenge, personally and professionally. I never would have left Wilson for any other firm but WATG. I worked with WATG on projects while at Wilson, and they respected and appreciated what interior designers brought to a project. WATG also recognized they were architects doing interiors but not well. I was brought in to reshape, rebrand and rebuild the interiors practice and that is how Wimberly Interiors came to be the interior design studio of WATG.

DI: Our theme is resilient security, which is, having been knocked down, how do we bounce back better than we were before — more confident, more certain? How are you approaching that?

MM: We need to step back and see how the past three years have changed the workplace in every industry and start there. The only way I was able to get to where I am was by rolling up my sleeves and doing whatever was asked of me (which included getting Trisha Wilson Entenmann's donuts in the early days) to emptying the dishwasher, organizing the library, cleaning up after my designers, along with all my other responsibilities. These are things I do to this day, and I don't consider them beneath me, below my paygrade — I consider it *teamwork!* But the workplace has become so politically correct. We all seem to hesitate to ask anyone to do anything other than their job description for fear of creating an HR event. To be more confident and more certain in this environment you've got to have the right team members in the trenches with you, people as committed to the process and result as you are. The uncertainty we were all dealing with during the height of COVID-19 resulted in us taking projects we might not have taken in the best of times and hiring candidates we might not have hired. We're reassessing everything at this point. We don't want to lose the heart and soul of what we do.



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DI: I share that work ethic. But now the world seems increasingly hard to grasp. People are worried about fame instead of doing some good, hard work. Can you talk more about that?

MM: I'm a firm believer in having a healthy work-life balance. We are constantly examining whether we are working hard or working smart. Designers coming out of school need to be mentored on how to grow into a successful career and the process they need to go through to grow and gain experience. Instant gratification is what we are up against. Everyone wants to run before they walk. They see these romanticized versions of their jobs on Instagram and want the lifestyle without putting in the work. It's up to us as leaders to create the culture where the staff sees and experiences the firm's senior leaders getting their hands dirty as well. Mentoring the staff is key in all this.

DI: Learning how to deal with the emerging generations is an adaptive kind of leadership. Your education wasn't in being a change agent, thriving in adversity or leading a firm in changing times. How are you making yourself more resilient as a leader? Is it a peer network? The school of hard knocks? Trial and error? Where do you find those skills in a world turned upside down?

MM: To a degree, I go with my gut, but it's also the experience of having gone through a couple recessions. You know when it's time to batten down the hatches and look at key components of the business, your pipeline, your clients, the economic forces at play. And there are those "oh sh*t" moments when the answers are clear. That's when you turn to your trusted peers in the firm and the industry. I'm extremely lucky to have a great network of trusted advisers, friends and colleagues who are far smarter than I am to lend advice and commiserate on the state of the industry and where we are going.

DI: People who have great mentors and networks are lucky. You're doing wonderful, unique, client-specific interiors all over the world. Can you talk to your secret sauce, your process?

MM: First off, it's not just me, it's my great studio directors in Los Angeles, London, Singapore and Shanghai that help make this whole thing work around the globe. I've been extremely lucky in my career to work all over the world. It doesn't matter if you are in a meeting in Asia, the Middle East or the U.S., it's about *listening, learning* and then *creating*. I'm a big believer that everyone has the right intentions — from the owner who may be under extreme pressure to get a project built to their over-taxed staff that has to make it happen. You need to be aware of who your audience is and read the room. What are the client's values? What is their motivation and end goal? Are we getting our information from the right person and are we talking to the right person? We've been in some challenging meetings where a chairman hasn't been briefed or hasn't a clue as to who we are and why we are there. Having grace under fire is critical in those situations. That's a skill you hone over time and with experience. That experience is what teaches us. That, and working with great people in our industry. You watch, listen and learn. That's most important. That's what has helped me in my career, knowing how and when to do that.

DI: You face obstacles in your role in design process and delivery. One I'm familiar with is the perceived preeminence of the architect, who far too many times treats the interior designer as an afterthought rather than an integral part of the team. What has your experience been? Are there cases where you are prime? If not, how do you deal with that whole mess?

MM: I love that you call it a mess, I call it mishegoss. On renovations we are typically in the driver's seat and on new construction I like to think we are sitting side by side.

DI: That takes a certain resilience on your part.

MM: This conversation has taken place since the beginning of time — at least we are no longer referred to as decorators. When I joined WATG they knew they were not doing interiors well and wanted to fix it. I will admit my first year was definitely not easy, but like everything in life, you have to earn respect. It's not something that is given. We also agreed to disagree and do what is best for the project and check our egos at the door, which is easier said than done, especially for me. I was empowered to do whatever was necessary to improve the practice and, in doing

so, I had to give respect to get it. I had moments that were not my best and I needed to remember to be a better listener to my colleagues as opposed to dictating to them what interiors was all about, to collaborate more closely with them as opposed to schooling them.

DI: It's easier to adapt when you've got a strong backbone and foundation to build from. How were you brought onboard?

MM: The CEO and board of directors recruited me. Eight people empowered me to do what I needed to do. It was huge to have that support. It was a commitment by the architects to say, "We are dabbling in interior design," and it took insightful thinking to realize they weren't succeeding, so they could either throw it out or fix it. They decided to fix it.

DI: What is your strategy for being more adaptive post-COVID?

MM: We are laser-focused on strategy, especially coming out of COVID, firmwide and within each service line. I've always said we can destroy this brand faster than we built it, and we always need to be looking under the hood to make sure we have the right talent, clients and projects — all the while not forgetting our core values. When I speak with our competitors, we are all struggling with the same thing: finding and keeping talent. We are only as good as the people we surround ourselves with, all the while watching what's happening in the economy, global politics and the changing landscape of our industry. We are extremely focused on talent right now. What I'm hearing is that work-life balance and self-love are really important to graduates entering our industry.

DI: I never took that class on teaching self-love at school. I didn't learn how to deliver that to others.

MM: Neither did I. It's a balancing act. Running a business — making sure we're profitable and that the people doing the work feel recognized, fulfilled and appreciated and are not burning out — is easier said than done. With fees being so competitive and clients wanting compressed schedules, it's hard to staff projects where you can check all the boxes and not burn people out. We have to be focused on managing client expectations for what is possible within their budgets and schedules without killing our teams. I've found that only works if you have empathy for where everyone is coming from. Clients are under immense pressure to get projects built on time and on budget. In these times that's challenging. Your teams work hard and want to do a great job but have only so many hours in the day.

DI: Those ever-growing pressures, clients, schedules and budgets are affecting the business. You've talked about the hard things you have to do, retaining people and those leadership responsibilities, but you're doing this because you love it. What aspects bring you delight? What gets you up in the mornings? What are you doing that you still love?

MM: Oh, there are days ... but they are rare. Of my friends, I am so lucky. I still love my job. I love what I do. I've been to places people only dream about. As you get more into management, you sometimes ask, "Oh God, what *do* I love about it?" Because there are days when you're just dealing with crap all day long.

DI: The ongoing challenge of getting rid of that clutter is like "Marie Kondo-ing" our careers.

MM: Yes! I was telling someone the other day, "You have to remember to be grateful." That's so basic for me. As you sit and complain about where you are in your life and your career, remember to be grateful, because this too shall pass. What I love is going after deals. I love new relationships and engaging with new clients. I'm at 40,000 feet now on the design part.

I have great people I get to work with. They are far more brilliant and more talented than I am and are creating incredible work. I love mentoring and creating a culture people love to work in. I'm not sure exactly what that is, but when people come see us in New York and go to all the design firms, they say, "This place has always been so special. Creating a culture that encourages doing great work and having a great time while you're doing it." That's what I love.

DI: A wonderful answer. Everything you said comes back to enabling and connecting people. Most of us go through a similar journey, but in the end, we realize we're doing it to connect and empower people, and that's what gives us the resilience and the strength to carry on.

MM: That's it: Let's keep doing what we love.



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Margaret McMahon is senior vice president and global director of Wimberly Interiors, a WATG company. In her 30 years in the design industry, she has produced an impressive portfolio of projects and an equally impressive list of clients. Under her leadership, Wimberly Interiors has launched studios in New York, Dubai, Shanghai and Los Angeles. Prior to joining WATG, McMahon was managing director of Wilson Associates' New York office and former president of the Network of Executive Women in Hospitality's (NEWH) New York chapter. Her natural talent lies in pinpointing details, analyzing conceptual designs and integrating reality with emotion.