

To learn more about the sales assessment mentioned in this article contact:

Dr. Larry Clark at Larry@LarryClarkGroup.com

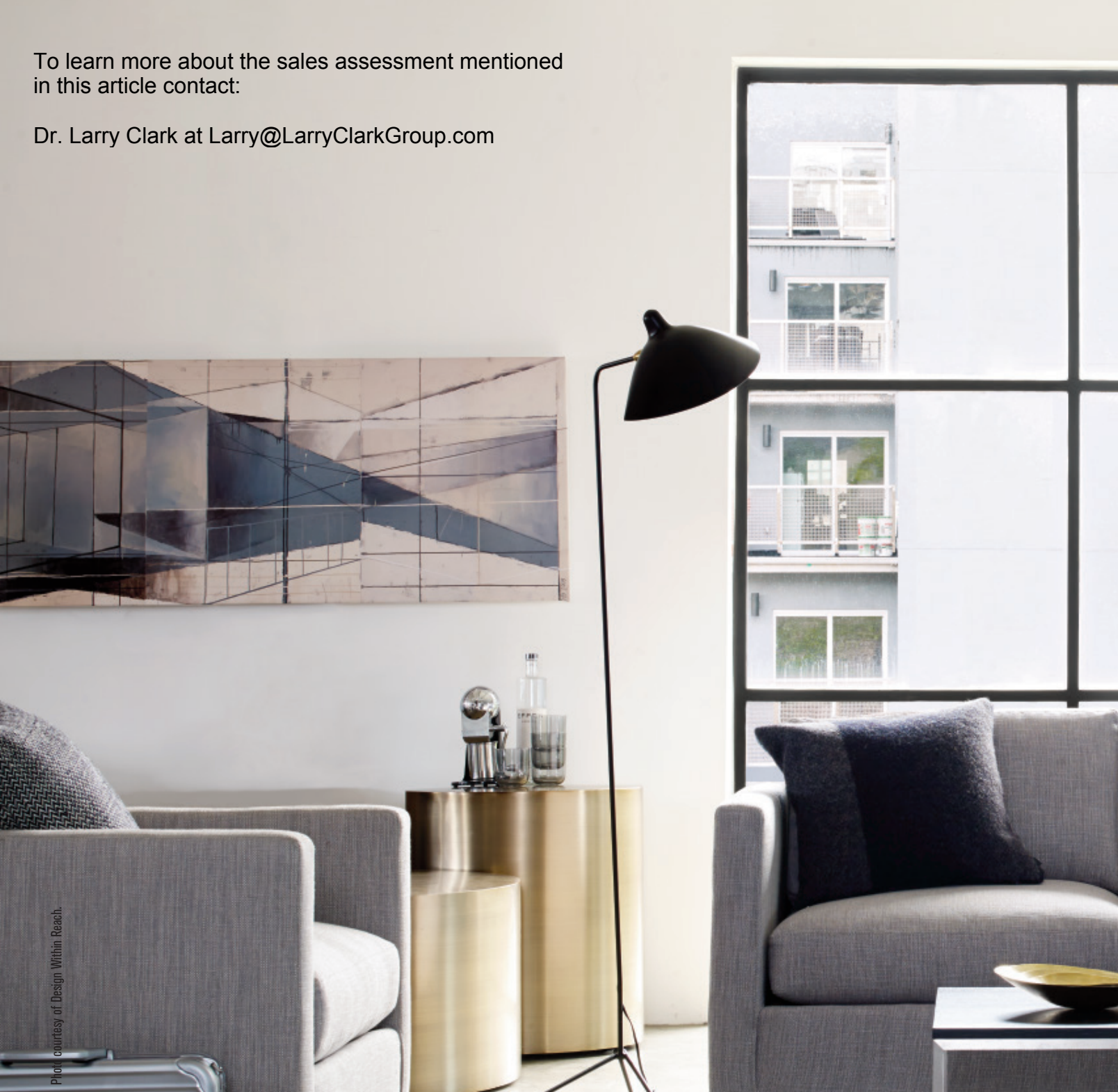


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MODERN DESIGN + HUMAN RESOURCES = GREAT PLACE TO WORK

By Seth Kahan



Photo courtesy of Design Within Reach.

MARCELLA BARRY, SENIOR PROFESSIONAL IN HUMAN Resources (SPHR®), is the chief HR officer at one of the coolest furnishing stores around, Design Within Reach (DWR). Its unique approach brings the best in modern design directly to the consumer through its Studios, catalog and online store.

DWR is an amazing brand. Barry said, “We are really the only company in the world that does what we do. We make authentic modern design accessible by partnering with esteemed designers and bringing their brands to the market. Our customers are literally getting a direct experience with high-quality design, straight from the artists, architects and designers behind it.”

The past few years have been an exciting time for DWR. Rob Forbes founded the company in 1999 in San Francisco. He was on a mission to educate the American public about what Europeans were already enjoying in their homes: the clean classics of contemporary designers. The effort was successful, and the DWR brand experienced a meteoric rise. As a result, Americans everywhere enjoyed a decided upturn in their home furnishings.

As consumers were educated, designers’ reputations grew, and DWR delivered a whole new aesthetic to homes across the continent. It seemed a great win-win-win situation, with customers enjoying beautiful furnishings, designers achieving profitable recognition and DWR attaining success.

But growth was not easy for the company. It rarely is. In 2010, DWR recruited CEO John Edelman and COO John McPhee to lead a transformation. Shortly after, the company decided to relocate its headquarters to Stamford, Connecticut, due to its proximity to New York City, a vibrant available workforce and the

opportunity to be part of the exhilarating renewal taking place in Stamford. The new 30,000-square-foot offices are located in one of America’s few neighborhoods certified at the Gold level by the Leadership in Environmental and Energy Design. This special recognition was awarded because of the 80-acre project’s environmentally sound design, planning and construction. DWR’s renovated 1870s brick building merges the industrial past of the former Yale Lock factory with a modern architectural style and an open office environment.

Along with a geographical move, there was a cultural shift. That’s when Barry was brought on board. “Moving from one coast to another was a major, major change for the company. I arrived in the fall of 2010. Approximately 40 people were brought from San Francisco to Stamford in the head office. Today we have more than 130 people in Stamford and another 300 across the country. We have had our most profitable years since that change has taken place,” Barry told me. The growth is visible.

Her work over the past three years has included the typical HR workload of defining business processes, overseeing benefits and putting the infrastructure in place to handle expansion. Barry views her success at DWR through the establishment of two core capabilities: sales and innovation.

Sales Capabilities

Barry’s team prepared the organization to achieve its goals with Studios around the country by establishing practices that increased sales capabilities. These practices included introducing a pre-employment sales assessment, codifying the DWR client



Photo courtesy of Design Within Reach.

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experience, establishing a progressive development plan and removing obstacles so the sales team could focus on selling.

When describing the pre-employment sales assessment, Barry told me, “We worked with an expert in industrial psychology to develop a selling styles assessment. It ranks competencies that are present in high-selling sales professionals. We are now able to tell whether or not a potential new hire is going to be a great seller. If you don’t have ability to sell, it’s tough. This has made us much more effective at determining whether or not a candidate is a fit for actual selling. It has dramatically improved our hiring process.

“We determined five elements of our client experience by studying the best practices of our top sellers,” Barry said. “Then we created the client experience at the Studio level.” For example, offering water to customers when they come in to the Studio and giving them tours are just two components of the DWR client experience. The experience is part of the company’s sales DNA. You can walk into a Studio anywhere in the country and have the same experience.

Progressive development plans (PDPs) make financial goals transparent to everyone in the Studios. The PDPs measure the sales team in two areas: client experience and financial goals. “Thanks to the PDP, there are no surprises. Everyone knows what they are being rated on and has the chance to see their results,” said Barry.

Another challenge typical of exceptional growth is communication. Effective communication practices are hard to set up because every organization is different. Communication practices are also strong influences on culture. With an

organization that is growing multistate operations, communicating is especially difficult. Barry said, “It’s easy to communicate when you are all under one roof, but when the majority of your people are spread across 20 states and an international location in Canada, you must ensure they are all connected.

“We have a culture of continuous improvement at the top tier, and communication is top-of-mind. Developing ways to communicate that ensure messages cascade down and touch every part of DWR is critical, so we invented new techniques.”

I asked her how she was able to give all employees a connection to the head office — a challenge when an organization spreads out geographically. Barry said, “We do that through area managers. Our area managers are each responsible for three to five Studios. They touch base with those Studios and all the employees frequently, so they are sharing the necessary messages.”

She continued, “We have quarterly CEO teleconferences. John [Edelman] will literally page through a catalog and educate our employees about new products. He goes into some detail about our designers, what they offer exclusively to DWR and what they mean to our ability to enhance, improve and beautify our customers’ lives.

“Our VP of Sales is the eyes and ears to the field, ensuring that the sales team is living the DWR client experience and that headquarters is meeting the clients’ expectations. Inspecting our expectations is critical to executing the DWR client experience,” Barry said, “and we bring in our area managers twice a year. They come to headquarters here in Stamford. Our goal is to have all our proprietors [similar to store managers] visit the head office, meet



Photo courtesy of Design Within Reach.

the executive team, meet the merchandising team and establish a personal connection with everyone.”

Barry works very closely with the VP of Sales to determine the messages that need to go out and how those messages are going to be cascaded down through the organization. She and her team have biweekly meetings with area managers to determine strengths and opportunities in their market from an HR perspective. In other words, when it comes to recruitment, talent, performance issues and retaining top sellers, Barry is in regular contact with the local representatives on the ground. This shows how finding and developing talent are closely linked to fortifying high-touch communication. The talent and communication efforts are inseparable at DWR, and Barry is a key element in bridging them.

She is embedded in DWR’s communication and sales processes. She works to make sure that all levels of the organization are informed, aware of new and exciting features and, at the same time, connected to sales performance. This again illustrates how DWR has built a direct link between internal communication and sales performance.

Barry told me, “This is a very high-touch organization. While we do use email and other social media platforms to communicate, it works best to be face-to-face with people. This is especially true for our area managers. They should be able to say, ‘I just spoke to the CEO and this is what is happening.’ It has so much more impact than communicating by memo.”

Innovation Capabilities

As a modern-design company, DWR is always thinking about innovation. For example, it is expanding its retail footprint, bringing together classic and new designers to collaborate on new works, developing new textiles and even creating amusing diversions for its audience.

DWR’s goal is to make authentic modern design accessible, and the company has a clear vision for the future growth of the business. Its plan is to greatly increase the average selling area in each Studio in order to support lifestyle presentation of an expanded product offering. In 2009, the average footprint of a DWR Studio was less than 3,500 square feet. Today, the average Studio is more than 6,000 square feet, and as existing leases come up for renewal, new Studios are being planned for between 10,000 and 15,000 square feet, depending on the local market.

The larger Studios will allow the company to partner with new designers while supporting the vendors that have been with DWR since its inception. In 1999, when DWR started, products from Knoll and Herman Miller were not readily available. Now DWR faces competition in these lines from numerous online-only retailers. In order to secure its position as an industry leader, DWR is working to update its collection with brands like Muuto, Verner Panton and Finn Juhl, which are not accessible in North America. “We are working with young designers like Brad Ascalon and famous designers like Jens Risom to create products available

Photo courtesy of Design Within Reach.



DWR headquarters in Connecticut

exclusively at DWR. Along with expanding our Studios, we are also expanding the creative teams that have made our catalog and website the dominant authority on modern furniture,” said Barry.

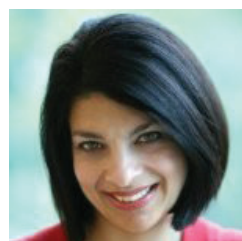
Iconic designer Jens Risom, now in his late 90s and one of the forebears of modern design, is working with a new designer, Chris Hardy, at DWR’s request. Together they are developing original pieces. DWR is literally making design history by pairing these two designers of stature to collaborate on a new series.

DWR has also developed its own brand-new textile collection, created with trusted partners in Italy and New York and offered for most of its in-stock upholstery collections. There are nine new textiles ranging from sturdy cotton to luxurious velvet and handsome alpaca wool.

As for diversions, what may not be a game changer but is fun and exciting nonetheless is the Design and Architecture Crossword, co-created by DWR and *The New York Times*. (Found on the DWR website, it’s a one-of-a-kind amusement for design junkies.)

By bringing together well-known designers, creating new textiles and partnering with *The New York Times* for professional amusement, DWR stays at the forefront of its field. And Barry is there all the way. As the CHRO, she is using her strategic acumen to ensure that DWR sustains its leading position in the marketplace.

Barry is at the center of the DWR nexus, pulling it all together. Her contributions come at a critical juncture. She has helped a growing company with new leadership and a geographical relocation of headquarters. DWR was just named to the Top Workplaces in Connecticut list by Hearst Media Services. It was one of 35 companies and organizations chosen in southern Connecticut, based solely on employee feedback. A total of 649 companies and 13,000 employees were surveyed. In 2012, Barry’s team won the HR Team of the Year Award, presented by the Southern Connecticut Chapter of the Society for Human Resource Management. Barry is a great example of how an HR leader can contribute strategically, providing the right kind of innovation to an organization on the rise. ■



Marcella T. Barry, SPHR, chief HR officer at Design Within Reach, earned her credential in 2009. In 2013, Design Within Reach won a place on the Top Workplaces in Connecticut list. Barry has more than 18 years of generalist experience that has given her a wealth of knowledge in executive coaching, talent acquisition, strategic HR planning, succession planning and change management.