

Art of feng shui employed in Buffalo offices

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Steve Weiss

Person

Linda Ellson knows a thing or two about working under cover. A certified classical feng shui practitioner and the president and owner of the Amherst-based Feng Shui Your World, Ellson often makes corporate house calls under the shroud of nightfall when most businesses are closed.

"I'm often brought in on Sundays when there's no staff around. I'm very much after hours," said Ellson, referring to a number of her clients who work in typically conservative fields like law or finance and would rather not let colleagues know about their taste for interior design.

Feng shui, (pronounced fung shway) is the ancient Chinese art of balance and placement. Literally translated, feng shui means wind and water, two of the five traditional elements; earth, fire, metal, water and wood. Feng shui is said to maximize the flow of chi, or positive energy, by balancing the elements, promoting harmony and reducing stress.

While most of Ellson's clients are residential, nearly 30 percent of her work comes from commercial clients and the number is growing. She lists local law firms, doctors' offices, real estate brokers, accountants, and insurance agents as just some of them.

Executives consult with Ellson on everything from real estate purchases for new office space, (to ensure a building faces in a "power direction"), rearranging the furniture, (to maximize the flow of chi), or buying new art for the boardroom.

Steve Weiss, an attorney and partner in the boutique law firm Cannon Heyman & Weiss, LLP, has worked with Ellson since 2004. Ellson helped him to shop for property when his firm moved from their previous location at Fountain Plaza to current offices in the Larkin Building on Exchange Street.

"For me it was about creating a productive and functional work space," he said.

"There are many aspects of feng shui from a practical business standpoint that

make a lot of sense, such as the feeling of calmness over being able to walk in to an office that has a clean desk and overall neatness. It's important that we also create a place where people want to work."

Ellson, who frequently holds seminars on doing away with clutter, helped tidy the busy law firm by hiding noisy electronic equipment in cabinets and placing fun task lighting in work areas, like over the fax and copy machine. Stacks of papers were filed away out of site and Ellson placed pieces of malachite, a green semi-precious stone, on employees' desks because, she said, it is supposed to be good for business success. Ellson said even common sense changes like this have a big impact.

"It's practical. Have a clear desk at the end of the day so that the first thing you say when you come in the morning isn't, 'here we go again.'"

Ellson helped identify the best property for Weiss based on criteria like the direction the office faced within the building, the floor on which the firm is located, the location of the main entrance and where employee workstations were placed and the direction they faced.

Direction and placement play a key role in feng shui. Each person has his or her own power direction based on career goals, job description and his or her birth date.

"A CEO's office space is going to be used very differently than support staff. They are more of the strategic planners and need a quiet, enclosed space," she said.

Ellson explained that she 'plugs' each client's pertinent information into the feng shui compass called the pa kua to calculate power directions and elements.

"Some people stuck in a cubicle can only go one way," said Ellson. "But, in a staff meeting or in the boardroom you can sit in your power direction. If you are talking to someone as a salesperson, you can switch your direction," she added.

Describing her approach with corporate clients, Ellson said first she identifies career goals. "Is it increasing business? Do they need to bring financials up or do they need better health for their staff, maybe there is lots of absenteeism. So many people are looking for ways to make their lives easier and more comfortable," she said. "Especially in business, we're bombarded with so many demands on our time."

She and other holistic practitioners tailor traditional feng shui to the daily demands of the workplace by making simple changes; painting office walls in a

soothing color, adding task lighting that's easier on the eyes than traditional overhead fluorescent bulbs, and getting rid of electronic clutter like the hundreds of emails most people have sitting in their in boxes. All of these can become overwhelming for people who spend upwards of eight hours a day in the same space.

Judi Spear, president and owner of The Spear Group, a bi-national executive coaching firm with offices in Canada and Williamsville, used the process of feng shui to improve employee performance and revenue for her business.

"Our office has a wonderful feel to it. It's a place where you can get things done, but it's also comfortable. People are seated facing their power direction and there is allocated space for clutter and paper, which is an ongoing problem in our office. "

Spear said since the transformation, her business has become 100 percent repeat referral. And while she attributes her success in part to feng shui, she said it might have something to do with the common sense theory that having an inviting place to go to work every day improves productivity.

"Am I going to say that feng shui improved my business? No. But having a well-constructed and designed environment that our team can work in has helped bring in good results."

On its most basic level, feng shui is just about feeling good in your space, whether it's a cubicle or the corner office on the tenth floor.

"I don't think feng shui is a magical pill or that it alone can improve the bottom line," said Ellson. "Psychologically, it slows you down. We talk about goals and challenges, what's going on in your business and in your life and how it relates to the real world."