The Challenges of a Collaborative Model

What are some of the challenges the company faces because of its collaborative nature? Hall admitted that when it comes to decision making the collaborative model is time consuming. “Sometimes there are one or two voices on the team who are louder than the others, which can cause delays in the process.” But Hall pointed out that although everyone has a voice in a collaborative model, that voice isn’t necessarily equal, as it would be in a democratic system.

Gundell said often it comes down to consensus, rather than agreement on the issue at hand. “I’m not sure we have the bench strength at times to accommodate all of the leaders. I am struggling with that in my own team,” said Gundell, who added that he often wonders how to facilitate the process so that team members can ‘step up’ and let him branch into other areas.

With such an idealistic kind of leadership model, are there any disconnects? Schor said it’s not about being a “maverick,” and added that the model derives from who Eileen Fisher, the person, is. “We don’t hire people at the highest level, but rather, invite them to spend six to nine months in the role. We coach them. We do this to help them embrace and understand the company philosophy.”

When asked how the team works within a model that tends to be less efficient than a hierarchical model, Gundell challenged the point, and disagreed with the premise. “At EILEEN FISHER, when things happen it is because people at every level want it and make it happen in a most powerful way. When a leader says: ‘Do this, do that,’ does everyone march forward? No. It’s the yin yang of this model.” In terms of efficiency in decision making, it doesn’t matter how powerful an idea is if it doesn’t get implemented, added Schor.

But, what happens when you bump up against other organizations with a different model? “Interfacing that way is challenging and it’s hard to explain externally. For example, when the CEO of Bloomingdale’s walks through the door, Eileen steps in. Department stores are 65 percent of our business, and relationships with key business leaders are important,” said Gundell.

Hall added that their model is definitely structured, their marketing strategy is proactive, and their message is united. Gundell agreed and said that structure is most apparent in the design end of things. “There are seasonal consensus points. We do have a timeline with steps, or else the product doesn’t get shipped.” Schor said those involved in designing the line are creative, visual, and often not deadline driven. “That’s when a facilitating leader — someone who is a strong operational person — is brought into the process.”

A Philosophy Engrained and Embedded
So, what would happen to the company if Eileen Fisher, herself, disappeared? The team was quick to say that company values are deeply embedded, and in fact, many areas of the company are being led without its founder’s input. At 55, although she is still very involved in the advertising and promotional end of things, the matriarch is delighted that more and more is done without her. Likewise, said Hall, the team has to think in terms of succession. “Work will continue if something happens to us, too. The culture permeates through all that we do.”

After listening to the comments of these three retail pundits, it’s clear that the EILEEN FISHER approach is a winning one soon to be embraced by their colleagues in the fashion industry. Thanks to their pioneering efforts, someday positions like “chief cultural officer” and “director of social consciousness” will be the norm rather than the exception. Surely, we will all reap the benefits.