

Harmony and Bottom Line: Hmm . . .

By JOBERT E. ABUEVA

Last spring, everything seemed to go wrong at Lunch at the Ritz Earwear Inc., a maker of custom jewelry in Lake Katrine, N.Y., about 100 miles north of New York. Several wholesale dealers it had served went out of business and sales plunged 30 percent. Key employees quit for no apparent reason and absenteeism soared.

The owners, Esme Hecht and Alexis Watts, were perplexed. Overall demand in the industry had not changed and neither had the way they ran their business. So they brought in a consultant, Sophia Tang Shaul, for advice. She offered this prescription: position a couple of boulders outside the front doors of the company's 15,000-square-foot plant to "protect" the organization; install a water fountain near the boulders to attract positive energy; move the office of Mr. Watts, the company president, from the southeast end of the building to the "wealth quadrant" on the south side to improve the bottom line, but keep Mr. Hecht, a vice president and designer, in the west end, or "creativity sector."

Almost immediately, the company's fortunes improved.

"When sales picked up, I thought it was a fluke, but it hasn't died down," Mr. Hecht said. "We also have a much happier group of employees and are hiring more than the number we lost last year."

He attributes the turnaround to Ms. Shaul's recommendations. So does his staff. Miriam Gibbons, the executive sales manager, who has been with the company since 1995, said, "I find myself drawn to the building even on weekends."

The changes, she says, have also increased her productivity. "When I was moved to the center of the building, which



Richard L. Harbus for The New York Times

Miriam Gibbons, above, at a fish-filled fountain in the lobby at Lunch at the Ritz Earwear. Employee lounge, left, is in designated "colors of the family."



abling chi, or cosmic energy, to flow freely and bring good fortune and high morale among employees. Lately, the practice has fast been finding its way into America's cubicles, factories and boardrooms.

"In the last two years, I've seen a significant shift in my clientele toward work-related projects," said Ms. Shaul, co-founder of 168 Feng Shui Advisors in Burbank, Calif., who says her clients include the movie production company Imagine Entertainment.

The American Feng Shui Institute in Monterey Park, Calif., says enrollment in its training classes reached 140 students last year from just a handful in 1991. The number of consultants listed in FengShuiDirectory.com has grown to more than 250 since it went online in 1998. And several books aimed at showing managers and workers how to harness its force have been published, including "Feng Shui at Work," by Kirsten M. Lagatree (Newleaf, 1998).

"No matter where you work, you can create an environment that will enhance your natural gifts and propel you toward success," Ms. Lagatree wrote.

Because feng shui (pronounced "fung shway") combines elements from astronomy, astrology, geology, mathematics and philosophy, there is some debate on exactly what it is. To inspect work sites and suggest rearrangements, for example, traditional practitioners use compasses, but the Black Hat Sect School of Berkeley, Calif., regarded as the catalyst for the movement's growth in the United States, uses a bagua, an octagonal chart.

Its disciples agree on one thing: it works. Gail Vogel is convinced that her consultations with Ann Billow, an interior designer and feng shui specialist in Manhattan, helped her find a marketing job with the Gottesman Company, a mergers and acquisitions broker. One action she took to enhance her search, she said, was to add mirrors to her home's "career" sector.

Another believer is Janet M. Loeffler, a co-owner of Bath Island, a personal care and gift shop on the Upper West Side. Business was slack, so she called Judith Wendell of Sacred Currents, a feng shui design firm, for advice. Ms. Wendell suggested simple changes like adding windsocks and chimes to the entranceway and eliminating clutter from the office in the store's wealth sector. An increase in traffic was instantaneous.

Ms. Loeffler said. People who thought the shop was relatively new to the neighborhood were surprised to learn that it had been there 10 years. Other changes included opening up aisle space, improving lighting and ventilation and introducing soothing aromas intended to put shoppers at ease and possibly in a buying mode. "In my six years here, this last one has been the best," said Kenna Kolaitos, a sales clerk.

To be sure, some skeptics dismiss feng shui as quackery. Craig Safian, a finance senior manager for Bristol-Myers Squibb who has worked in Hong Kong, said the practice of reconstructing buildings there because of feng shui was "fiscally irresponsible and a sign of a chemical imbalance."

Even some adherents say the principles are being exploited. "Someone was interviewed on radio recently because they came up with feng shui makeup," said Wendover Clover, manager of FengShuiDirectory.com. "That's ridiculous."

Fast Feng Shui

Four tips for improving the chi, or energy, of a workspace:

- 1 If you have an office, place your desk so that you face the door but aren't in direct line with it. If that is not possible, hang a mirror on the wall that lets you look at the door.
- 2 Use a round worktable for meetings with colleagues to foster harmony.
- 3 Adorn your desk with plants. Water them; they must be alive to activate chi.
- 4 Clear your desk of clutter, the biggest foe of chi.

they call the wealth and power section, I thought, 'Sure, whatever,'" Ms. Gibbons said. "But I, too, started exceeding my goals." To top it off, she added, she won two big lottery prizes.

Just what management medicine did Ms. Shaul dole out, anyway? Actually, it may be better described as alternative therapy. It is called feng shui, the ancient Chinese principles of creating a harmonious environment.

In many parts of Asia, it is routine for businesses and government agencies to call a feng shui specialist, or practitioner, to ensure that the lighting, furniture, doors and windows make up a harmonious whole, en-