Designing Interactions at Work: Applying Design to Discussions, Meetings and Relationships

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Great designers want their ideas to make a difference. The Harmut Esslingers, Jonathan Ives, and Milton Glasers of the world create objects that are meant to be used, services that are meant to be engaged, and experiences that are meant to be lived. As Tim Brown, CEO of IDEO, has said, "Success is all about impact. Designers get turned off if their ideas don't make it out into the world." An elegant and thoughtful design solution is a success only if it has real resonance and value to human beings.

Great business leaders-like A.G. Lafley, Steve Jobs, and Mike Lazaridis-define success in a remarkably similar way. They too want innovations that have resonance, innovations that are game changers. Successful innovations create new value that can transform a company's place in the market and its relationship with its customers.

Ultimately, designers and business leaders want the same thing: transformative ideas that can be translated into real value. Yet, even with this common purpose, the interactions between design teams and business leaders often represent the biggest stumbling block to the development of breakthrough ideas. How often has a brilliant design idea been strangled in its infancy by a client who could not, or would not, "get it"? How often is breakthrough innovation stopped short by number crunchers who don't understand the process of design or the insights afforded by it? And how often do business folks moan that designers lack even the most basic understanding of cost and strategy?

This stumbling block to innovation exists in part because designers and business people speak different languages. They use different words, hold different values, take different approaches and work toward different goals. Designers focus on things like meaning, authenticity, and empathy. Business folks, on the other hand, embrace a world of regression analysis, pie charts, and data. These predispositions can easily lead designers to see the business side as narrow-minded, visionless autocrats and the business side, in turn, to regard the designers as undisciplined, flaky dreamers.

This dichotomy-and the tension it creates-has occasionally been overstated, but it has the potential to derail progress at every turn. Mistrust and dissention can easily grow, and before long the design and business fields view each other as adversaries who must be overcome. Rather than working together, the two tribes set themselves in opposition and work at cross purposes-to the detriment of the project, the business, and the individuals involved.

If, instead, we were to turn our minds explicitly to the design of more productive interactions, the dynamic would shift dramatically. What if, instead of dismissing non-believers as narrow-minded, we approached the conversations with these folks as a legitimate design challenge? In our view, more innovation would result.

Consider a prototypical project team tackling a wicked design problem. It does so using a set of proven tools and techniques: The team dives first into understanding the user and how his or her needs connect to the problem at hand. Then, with that understanding in mind, the team begins to prototype and test solutions that seek to address the user's needs. Along the way, the team thinks deeply and carefully about the best way to interact with users to get the answers they need. The team engages in ethnographic observation, open-ended questions, and experimentation-all of which are grounded in an abiding respect for the views and values of the end user. The user is of vital importance, and is treated that way by all concerned.

Now contrast that experience with a typical interaction with the client or business team. The design team does a great deal of work, generates insights, and comes to the table with a set of ideas they're excited about. What happens then? Rarely is the interaction a truly collaborative discussion that improves the design and pushes it forward to market. No. In some cases, the designs are killed dead on the spot. Or they are watered down by business teams obsessed with proven market data and bottom lines. And very often, the designs are weakly accepted and then left to molder on a shelf, with no internal champion to advance them. In the wake, the design team dismisses the client as unworthy and ineffective, chalking up the failure as one of client execution.

But look at the interaction from the point of view of the business team. To them, the discussion with the design team looks an awful lot like a standard "buy-in" session. That is, the business-team members are presented with a fait accompli and asked to buy in to the recommendation. With little room to move, the options typically are: Reject it outright, accept it but do something to mitigate the damage, and accept it publicly but work privately to keep it from ever seeing the light of day-all tried-and-true processes for dealing with folks who want your sign-off but not your collaboration. From this point of view, it's a wonder that any breakthrough innovations see the light of day at all. No, they are much more likely to be killed, weakened, or starved.

So how can we avoid this outcome? The good news is, while design teams aren't alone in falling victim to this dynamic, they do have access to the tools and techniques that can help us out of it. If designers and business teams alike were to apply the stance and tools designers use on an everyday basis to thinking about interactions with colleagues-treating them less like adversaries and more like the valuable and central end user-better outcomes could result.

Adopting the Designer's Stance

It begins with the stance, or mind-set, that great designers take on when they tackle a new design challenge. This stance is an open posture that seeks to understand deeply and explore broadly. If we were to move into that stance when thinking about designing our next meeting, how would we act? Well, we would listen a lot more. We would think much more explicitly about who we are talking to and how those people might think. We would contemplate how to speak to those people in a way that elicits the kinds of answers that are truly informative and helpful.

It means taking more time than we normally do to explicitly consider the people and relationships in the room. All too often, we implicitly assume that everyone in a meeting is on the same page in regards to process and goals. How can we be sure? And how serious are the consequences if we are not? Take the time to think about the players, their viewpoints and needs, as well as the best process for the discussion. Then, apply the tools of the designer to the interaction:

Observe

When it comes to understanding users, the best designers seek to develop an empathic understanding-a deep, true understanding of who that user is and what he or she needs. This level of understanding is fundamental to good design, because without it, we can't hope to answer those needs and connect with users in a meaningful way. Yet when it comes to colleagues whose views and tools differ from our own, our strategy more often than not is to guess what they are feeling, assume we know what they are thinking, shut them down, and shut them out.

Contemplate the effect on your relationships at work if you were to instead approach colleagues using the same lens designers apply to standard design tasks-seeking to understand them, empathize with them, and speak to them in a way that resonates deeply with them.

Consider this example: Design teams and business teams often come into conflict over change. Designers are seen as change agents seeking to push existing boundaries and develop new alternatives to the status quo. Businesspeople, on the other hand, are often deeply invested in the status quo and uncomfortable with shifting away from it without careful consideration and a high threshold of proof. Given this tension, one can choose to write the other party off or to turn the tools of the trade to figuring out what is behind their view. We can ask, Why is this person so invested in the status quo (or the new alternative)? What are the elements of the status quo (or the new alternative) to which he or she is most attached and why? What are the logic and assumption embedded in the status quo (or alternative), and how do they differ from the ones underlying the opposing model?

Reverse-engineering the choices in this way-and seeking to truly understand the "user experience" of the options-can illuminate your way forward in the same manner that deeply understanding users of any other product, process, or idea can. Taking an ethnographer's approach to the views that differ from your own can not only help explain the models your colleagues hold, but it can also help identify which elements of your view make them most nervous and why. Only then can you address those concerns in a productive way, or even come to agree with some of them yourself.

Imagine

In design, the imaginative step involves abductive reasoning-asking not what is true, but what could be true. This question, which becomes second nature to the best designers, is one almost never heard in the boardroom. Business folks have been trained to venerate proof generated through inductive and deductive means and to mistrust anything that lacks quantifiable data. In designing more productive interactions, we need to overcome this barrier. What can you do in the absence of proof to calm nerves? How can you help build a business case of legitimate standing? These are important questions when seeking to improve interactions with your colleagues, and ones that are unlikely to be asked unless you apply your design savvy to the task.

Try applying abductive reasoning to the process plan itself. Ask yourself, if you were to design a new process for working with this group of colleagues, one that could leverage their strengths and expertise to achieve a better end product, what would that process look like? What might their ideal process look like? How might you go about co-designing a process that incorporates the best of both approaches? Remember, ask yourself what could be, not what is. Designers ask the business team to imagine what could be relative to a design solution; why not take the same approach to the interaction design?

Then it is a question of thinking through a way of engaging your colleagues in the process. Demonstrating a genuine interest in their view and a level of respect for their recommendations are good early steps. So is explicitly designing a process together and gaining agreement to that process before delving into issues of content. And finally, exhibiting a stance that clearly says you are open to new possibilities-rather than that you're just into getting sign-off on existing ones-is helpful and productive.

Configure
We prototype and test solutions for products, services, and experiences. Why not for interactions at work as well? Design a process and try it. Test it. Get feedback and refine. Bring the discipline of prototyping itself into the discussion explicitly. Together with your colleagues, seek to imagine an option-an answer to the dilemma that you face. The prototype of that option takes the form of a happy story of what could be. Lay out the story of that option together and then ask: What would have to be true for us to make that happy story a reality? How could we test to see what really is true? What, if it were not true, would prevent us from choosing this option? Explore and test these options to refine your prototype.

In the best of all worlds, we would create an interaction that becomes a design session, just as Procter & Gamble has done with its strategy-review process. Not so long ago, the process by which P&G's category presidents generated and received approval on their annual plans was a standard buy-in process, designed to utterly minimize the amount of actual feedback. Presidents would come to the annual review with a thick deck of slides and a single right answer for the coming year. More slides–mini-presentations, really–were prepared to address any objections top management could conceivably raise. To make sure the strategy was airtight, and would receive an easy approval, risky creative leaps were out of the question.

When A.G. Lafley became CEO, he devised a new process. Presidents would submit their slide decks two weeks before the meeting. Lafley would read the

materials and issue a short list of questions that he wanted to discuss. Presidents were then allowed to bring only three pieces of paper-charts, graphs, notes-to the meeting. This new process meant that the strategy meetings had to become discussions rather than presentations. Only by more or less forcing category managers to toss around ideas with senior management, Lafley reasoned, could they become comfortable with the logical leaps of mind needed to generate new ideas.

At first the presidents and their teams chafed at the new process. Actual dialogue at the senior levels of P&G had been exceedingly rare. Rather than engaging in dialogue, executives had devoted their time to bulletproofing arguments, then advocating and defending them. Dialogue was different, foreign, and unnerving. Only after two or three cycles did the presidents come to see how invigorating it was to engage in dialogue about what could be rather than what is. It was also great for their businesses: Freed from the demand to come up with the single right answer and prove it, they started to work out bigger bets with the corporate team. Simply redesigning the meeting process had a profound effect on the players and the outcome. That is the effect of applying design thinking to interactions.

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