bbetween

EXPLORING AND CONNECTING CREATIVE CULTURES AT BILLY BLUE

Demonstrating the value of design (thinking)

# Designing relationships:
## Applying design to interactions at work

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DIFFICULT INTERACTIONS BETWEEN DESIGN TEAMS AND BUSINESS LEADERS REPRESENT A BIG STUMBLING BLOCK IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF BREAKTHROUGH IDEAS. HOW OFTEN IS 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 COSTS AND STRATEGY, OF HOW TO TURN IDEAS INTO DOLLARS?

Though it is sometimes overstated, there is a real and significant schism between business folks and designers. They use different words, hold different values, take different approaches and work towards different goals. Designers focus on things like meaning, authenticity and empathy. Business folks embrace regression analysis, pie charts and data. These predispositions can lead designers to look at the business folks as narrow-minded, visionless autocrats and the business folks, in turn, to regard designers as undisciplined, flaky dreamers. 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.

This dynamic raises an interesting question: could we increase the chances of breakthrough innovation if we turned our minds explicitly to the design of more productive interactions? What if, instead of dismissing non-believers on the other side of the divide, we approached conversations with them as a legitimate design challenge?

### ADOPTING THE DESIGNER'S STANCE

The path to more productive interactions begins with the stance, or mindset[A], that great designers take on when they tackle a new design challenge. This stance is an open one, which seeks to understand deeply[B] and explore broadly[C]. If you were to move into that stance at our next meeting, how would you act? Well, you would listen a lot[D]. You would think explicitly about who you are talking to and how those people might think. You would contemplate how to speak to those people in a way that gets the kinds of answers that are truly informative and helpful.

This means taking more time than we normally do to explicitly consider the people and relationships in the room. All too often, we implicitly assume[E] that everyone in a meeting has the same process and goals. Instead, take the time to think about the players, their viewpoints and needs, as well as the best process for the discussion.

### OBSERVE

When it comes to understanding users, the best designers seek to develop an empathic understanding[F] – a deep understanding of who that user is, and what he or she needs. 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[G], assume we know what they are thinking and shut them out.

What if you were to approach colleagues using the same lens designers apply to standard design tasks instead – seeking to understand them, empathise with them and speak to them in a deeply resonant way? Ask[H]: what is the person's view? Why do they hold it? What are the logic and assumptions that support it? Reverse engineering[I] their thinking in this way – seeking to truly understand the "user experience" of that view – 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 differing views can not only help explain the models your colleagues hold, it can help to identify which elements of your view make your colleagues most nervous and why. Only then can you address those concerns in a productive way.

### IMAGINE

In design, the imaginative step involves abductive reasoning[J] – asking not what is true, but what could be true. This question 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 has no 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 to improving 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*[K]. 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?

**'COULD WE INCREASE THE CHANCES OF INNOVATION IF WE TURNED OUR MINDS TO THE DESIGN OF MORE PRODUCTIVE INTERACTIONS?'**



I ♥ mac. [A] Think like a designer

[D] Listen alot

[C] Explore broadly

A-HA!

[B] Understand deeply

[E] Don't make assumptions

[F] Put yourself in other people's shoes

[G] Don't guess emotions

# Go!
## Set.
### *Reeeady.*

**I** Reverse engineer

*How long is a piece of string?*

**H** Ask questions

Then, it is a question of engaging your colleagues in the process. Demonstrating a genuine interest in their view and a level of respect[L] 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[M] – rather than 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? Design a process and try it. Test it. Get feedback and refine it. 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 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.

**L** Respect

**K** Ask yourself what could be, not what is

**N** Prototype

**P** Seek feedback

**O** Test

**Q** Refine

**J** Abductive reasoning

*Article adapted from 'Designing Interactions at Work: Applying Design to Discussions, Meetings and Relationships', which first appeared in Interaction Magazine, March/April 2010.*
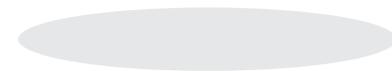
**M** Be open to new possibilties