

Design Thinking and Your Organization

In *Change By Design* by Tim Brown (2009), pp. 229-36.

Begin at the beginning (p. 229)

Design thinking starts with divergence, the deliberate attempt to expand the range of options rather than narrow them. The designer's inclination to explore new directions is of little value if it comes at the end of the innovation process, by which time the arc of the story has begun to close. Companies should have design thinkers sitting on their corporate boards, participating in their strategic marketing decisions, and taking part in the early stages of their R & D efforts. They will bring the capacity to create new unexpected ideas and will use the tools of design thinking as a means of exploring strategy. **Design thinkers will connect the upstream with the downstream.**

Take a human-centered approach (p. 229)

Because **design thinking balances the perspectives** of users, technology, and business, it is by its nature integrative. As a starting point, however, it privileges the intended user, which is why I have consistently referred to it as a "human-centered" approach to innovation. Design thinkers observe how people behave, how the context of their experience affects their reaction to products and services. They take into account the emotional meanings of things as well as their functional performance. From this try to **identify people's unstated, or latent, needs and translate them into opportunities**. The human-centered approach of the design thinker can inform new offerings and increase the likelihood of their acceptance by connecting them to existing behaviours. **Asking the right kinds of questions** often determines the success of a new product or service: *Does it meet the needs of its target population? Does it create meaning as well as value? Does it inspire a new behaviour that will be forever associated with it? Does it create a tipping point?*

The typical default approach is to start with prevailing business constraints – marketing budgets, supply-chain networks, and the like – and extrapolate from there, but this tactic leads to incremental ideas that are easily copied. Starting with technology is the second most common approach but is risky and best left to agile start-ups that are in a position to bet on something new and untested. **Starting with humans increases the likelihood of developing a breakthrough idea** and finding a receptive market – whether managers of fancy resort hotels or subsistence farmers in Cambodia. At both extremes, the first step is to ensure that those involved in your innovation efforts get as close as they can to their intended customers. **Reams of market data are not substitute for getting out into the world.**

Fail early, fail often (p. 230)

Time to first prototype is a good measure of the vitality of an innovation culture. *How rapidly are ideas made tangible so that they can be tested and improved?* Leaders should encourage experimentation and accept that there is nothing wrong with failure as long as it happens early and becomes a source of learning. **A vibrant design-thinking culture will encourage prototyping** – quick, cheap, and dirty – as part of the creative process and not just a way of validating finished ideas. A promising prototype will generate a buzz among members of the design team, who will become enthusiastic advocates as it becomes a candidate for funding and support. The real test of a prototype, however, is not internal but out in the world, where it can be experienced by the farmers, schoolchildren, business travelers, or surgeons who are its intended users. **Prototypes need to be testable, but they do not need to be physical.** Storyboards, scenarios, movies, and even improvised acting can produce highly successful prototypes – the more the better.

Get professional help (p. 231)

I do not cut my own hair or change the oil in my car, even though I probably could. **There are times when it makes more sense to go outside your organization and look for opportunities to expand the innovation ecosystem.** Sometimes this will take the form of co-creation with customers or new partners. Sometimes it will mean hiring experts, who may be technology specialists, software geeks, design consultants, or fourteen-year-old video gamers. We have seen how, with the help of the Internet, products and services moving beyond passive consumption. The active participation of customers and partners is not only likely to yield more ideas but will create a web of loyalty that will be hard for your competitors to erode. Innovators will exploit Web 2.0 networks to expand the effective scale of their teams, and hyper-innovators will be ready for 3.0 whenever it comes.

Extreme users are often the key to inspirational insights. These are the specialists, the aficionados, and the outright fanatics who experience the world in unexpected ways. They force us to project our thinking to the edges of our existing customer base and expose issues that would otherwise be disguised. Seek out extreme users and **think of them as a creative asset.** Remember that they may be found on the other side of town or the other side of the world.

Share the Inspiration (p. 232)

Don't forget your internal network. Much of the effort concerning knowledge sharing over the past decade has been focused on efficiency. It may be time to **think about how your knowledge networks support inspiration** – not just streamlining the progress of existing programs but stimulating the emergence of new ideas. *How can you connect like-minded folks to leverage their common passions? What is the typical fate of new ideas within your organization? How can you leverage insights about consumers to inspire multiple projects? Are you using digital tools to document your project outcomes in a way that deepens the knowledge base of your organization and allows individuals to learn from it and to grow?*

The rise of virtual collaboration – and of airfares – makes it easy to forget **the value of bringing people together in the same room.** In a hundred years this notion may seem quaint, but for now it is the way to create powerful bonds. Challenge your organization to think about how it can spend more time doing collaborative, generative work that will produce a tangible outcome at the end of the day – not having more meetings. **Face-to-face time cultivates relationships and nourishes teams and is one of the most precious resources an organization possesses.** Make it as productive and creative as possible. Building on the ideas of others is a whole lot easier when the building is happening in real time and among people who know and trust one another. And it is usually a whole lot more fun.

Blend big and small projects (p.233)

There is no silver bullet for innovation. Think of it more as “silver buckshot.” It makes sense to take a variety of approaches to innovation, but think about which ones are most likely to leverage the strengths of your organization. Diversify your assets. **Manage a diversified portfolio of innovation** that stretches from shorter-term incremental ideas – how to increase the mileage of this year's model – to longer-term revolutionary ones – how to produce a car that runs on soybeans or sunbeams. The majority of your efforts will take place in the incremental zone, but without exploring more revolutionary ideas you risk being blindsided by unexpected competition. The downside: you may see fewer of these projects going to market. The upside: those that do are likely to have a lasting impact.

Encouraging experimentation is easy in the incremental zone. **Business units should be encouraged to drive innovation around existing markets and offerings.** The creative leader must also be willing to support the search for more breakthrough ideas from the top, whether this

means introducing a new line of office furniture or a new primary school curriculum. Most organizations have metrics that measure the effectiveness of a division on its own terms. This type of thinking undermines effective collaboration across departmental silos. **It is precisely in the interstitial spaces, however, that the most interesting opportunities lie.**

Budget to the pace of innovation (p. 234)

Design thinking is fast-paced, unruly, and disruptive, and it is important to resist the temptation to slow it down by relying on cumbersome budgeting cycles or bureaucratic reporting procedures. Rather than sabotage your most creative asset, be prepared to rethink funding schedules as projects unfold according to their own internal logic and teams learn more about the opportunities before them.

Agile resource allocation is challenging in any organization and downright scary in large ones. But there may be ways around a crippling reliance on the predictability of markets and the discipline of annual budgets. Some companies have experimented with venture funds that can be tapped to support promising projects. Others rely on the judgment of senior management to release funding as projects reach certain milestones. The trick is to accept that **milestones cannot be predicted with certainty** and that projects acquire an inner life of their own. Budgeting guidelines must be expected to change many times over. The key to agile budgeting is a review process that relies upon the judgment of senior leadership rather than some kind of algorithmic process mechanically applied. That's how venture capital funds operate, and successful venture capitalists are nothing if not nimble.

Find talent any way you can (p. 234)

Design thinkers may be in short supply, but they **exist inside every organization. The trick is spotting them, nurturing them, and freeing them to do what they do best.** *Who among your staff spends time watching and listening to customers? Who would rather build a prototype than write a memo? Who seems to get more out of working with a team than holed up in a tastefully appointed cubicle? Who comes to the organization with a weird background (or just a weird tattoo) that might be a clue to a different way of looking at the world?* **These people are your raw material and your energy supply.** They are money in the bank. And since they are accustomed to being marginalized, they will respond with alacrity to an opportunity to get involved in exciting projects at the earliest stage. If they happen to be designers, get them out of the comfort of their design studio and into interdisciplinary teams. If they are from Accounting, Legal, or HR, give them some art supplies.

Once you have tapped your internal resources, think about how you handle recruiting. Hire budding design thinkers from schools that “get it,” and **bring in some interns and team them up with the more seasoned design thinkers you already have.** Create some projects that have relatively short time horizons but are focused on divergent thinking. Share the results around the organization. **Get a buzz going around design thinking**, and converts will come crawling out of the woodwork. There is nothing as seductive to a true innovator as optimism.

Design for the cycle (p. 235)

In many organizations the cadence of business calls for people to shift their job assignments every eighteen months or so. However, most design projects take longer to move from the launching pad and through their implementation phase – particularly projects aimed at a real breakthrough. **When core team members are not able to follow a project through the complete cycle, both will suffer.** The guiding idea behind a project is likely to be diluted, attenuated, or lost. Individuals will feel that their learning curves have been wasted and may be left with a sense of frustration that is hard to shake...the entire cycle of a project is invaluable.