

# How To Lead With Design Thinking

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### **Management is fundamentally antithetical to leadership.**

This leads to a conundrum in many organizations. Leadership is to management, what snowboarding is to skiing; what jazz is to classical orchestration; what Zara is to Sears; and what Netflix was to Blockbuster. Where management wants to control, streamline and create repeatable, consistent outcomes, great leadership seeks to spawn, disrupt and provoke unpredictable growth that we may never before have seen. Leadership can be unwieldy.

Therefore, it is helpful to access tools and lenses that help us navigate unpredictable terrain when attempting to lead with excellence. Design thinking is one of those lenses.



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Design Thinking is a problem solving method borrowed from design and applied to the design of the intangible: to services, processes and experiences. When used as the lens for leadership, cool things can happen.

Design thinking in a leadership context occurs from the inside-out, on three levels: on the personal, in facilitating teams, and when connecting to clients. Here are 7 principles to keep in mind when leading with the design thinking lens.

### **7 Principles of Leading with Design Thinking**

#### **Start With People First**

One of the first principles of design thinking is to have an empathetic stance, to pose the question "What problem am I solving for my user?" Being hyper-human centered actually can drive efficiencies, productivity and profitability- because we are then focused on the fact that we are in business because of the people who buy our products and services.

#### **The Worm's Eye View Rules**

Getting out of the 4 walls of your office building, or whiteboard room (where you can get stuck with the Bird's Eye View), and out on to the street--the Worm's Eye View- where your customers live, move, think and make decisions is critical. The Estonian branding firm Brand Manual leads with this principle, and therefore unearths great insights for its clients. Using the Worm's Eye View also means that qualitative research methods and ethnography become more utilized in market research.

Failure IS An Option. Uh-Oh. This is a big culture shift in any organization. Leaders cannot just say "It's ok if you fail, you won't get fired!" They have to build in incentives to fail and show through their own example that they are granting permission for employees to fail. Just think, we would never have the ubiquitous Post It note had it not been for failure! Companies such as Velvet Creative Alliance, a strategic design firm, and The Ritz Carlton have successfully created organizational culture shifts because they have designed structures that incentivize employees to share and learn from failures.

### **Story Is A Strategic Tool**

It is no accident that the most innovative companies today also have short 3-minute films posted on YouTube that have gone viral- i.e. in excess of 65 million views in some cases. These short stories never once advertise the company's product or service- but instead promote the meta-values that speak meaningfully to us. Think of Dove's Real Beauty Sketches, Chipotle's "Back to the Start" for which it won a Cannes Film Festival Award, and Taiwan Bank's "Dream Rangers".

### **Problem Framing Is The Priority**

It is wonderful to begin encouraging yourself and your teams to focus on problem solving versus a solutions-focused approach. However, the

majority of your time should be spent focused on framing the problem. That is, did you even ask the right question? Before you spend millions of dollars on a new product launch, make certain that you and your teams have done thorough due-diligence in determining what the real question is, mapped back to the needs of the people to whom you are selling. For example, a company like Gillette has done well to ask, "Why do men shave?" instead of "How do we sell more razors?" These are two totally different questions, yielding different insights!

### **Brilliance Comes From The Margins-**

This point speaks to the value of encouraging emergent leadership, and calling upon the under-tapped competencies of those on the front line in sales or in supporting roles. This could lead to a shift away from hierarchies to holacracies, which is a shift Zappos has made. Design thinking has the capacity to democratize leadership.

### **Prototype & Experiment**

Designers are excellent at embracing the rough draft, the ugly mock up held together with duct tape, and using those models to get reactions and new questions from potential users and customers. Similarly, we can prototype services, experiences and processes; a pop-up shop is one way to do this and there are examples in finance (PNC Bank) and in healthcare (Independence Blue Cross' Independence Express

Truck). Using the language of 'experiment' and 'prototype' gives us permission that our idea might fail, not work out -and that is ok, because we can always learn from experimentation. Following these seven principles of design thinking can help you lead in meaningful ways.

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