

Design Thinking For The Rest of Us

By Salman Mufti

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IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT CREATIVITY IS “INTELLIGENCE HAVING FUN.” DESIGN thinking is the business and innovation process that best captures this spirit.

Design thinking is a methodology that helps individuals and teams create innovative ideas that solve user or customer problems. It could result in inspired products or services for customers or smarter internal processes for organizations.

Design thinking has been associated with technology firms and start-ups. In my experience, though, it is powerfully attractive to managers and leaders at established organizations such as retailers, banks, or government departments that are not necessarily based on technology yet are in the midst of change. I see three reasons why. One, leaders in these organizations are too busy with day-to-day business and may not have enough time to invest in creating new products or processes. Two, they don't want to take on another big project, particularly something risky, that may be seen as costly or stressful. And three, they are inspired by stories from other industries and truly want to be challenged to get out of their own domain and think differently.

Design thinking is a way to address that. It is a simple and enjoyable process, directly applicable to the problem or opportunity at hand. It allows people to start quickly and get tangible results. It reduces the stress that managers in established companies may harbour about the process of

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innovation — that it's something for marketing or tech departments. And it works equally well for incremental or radical innovation. After all, in most organizations, the majority of revenue comes from incremental innovation; a series of modest breakthroughs can add up to transformational change.

Over the years, a well-established process for design thinking has been developed, based on four phases:

- Empathize to surface the underlying problem
- Imagine creative yet practical solutions
- Use prototypes as sample solutions
- Sell the solutions with stories

There are two key principles that guide this process: empathy and prototyping.

Empathy means feeling what it's like to be in another's shoes — understanding how the customer experiences your product or service. It involves careful observation of users to understand what's important to them on both functional and emotional levels. Prototyping is well understood as creating physical or digital models that help designers define, test, and communicate their ideas. Prototyping is all about failing earlier (and often) to succeed sooner.

What does design thinking look like in practice?

:: Phase One: Empathize to Surface the Underlying Problem

Gathering insights is about getting a sense of how users experience your product, service, or process, and what their needs are. It seems simple, certainly something that countless organizations try to do every day when they commission focus groups. But this first phase in design thinking is much more ambitious than that. Instead of asking users open-ended or specific questions, this process involves observing them in action. What hacks or workarounds do they develop to make your offering more useful to them? What does their body language say; are they smiling or detached? It is important not to rely on focus groups for these insights since users may not even be aware of the problem or shortcoming they're experiencing.

What it looks like: A coffee shop company struggled with line ups and delays at the cash. Managers assumed the culprit was either unclear signage or poor store layout. When they put themselves in the patrons' shoes to understand their experiences, they realized there were multiple types of customers, each having their own ways of moving through the coffee shop. While many had simple requests, some required customization and others made multiple orders. Understanding how these groups had to be processed differently, managers redesigned their mobile app with personas and retrained their staff to stream customers efficiently.

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:: Phase Two: Imagine Creative Yet Practical Solutions

The first step in this phase is to decide on the one problem to solve. You can uncover more than one problem or opportunity; people in design thinking mode can get so inspired after gathering insights that they want to tackle multiple issues. Fight the urge and focus instead. Once the problem has been identified, it's time for the fun part of generating potential solutions from brainstorming, mash-ups, or other team-based exercises. Even though you're working on one problem, you will want to ideate multiple solutions — in quantity and diversity — to stretch your thinking. By the end of the session, you should be able to agree on a solution that is both innovative and practical.

What it looks like: Financial services firms require clients to fill out forms in order to complete and confirm transactions. Often clients are given the opportunity to review and sign the forms at home and then fax or email them to the firm. Unfortunately for clients, many forms are stuffed with legal jargon and hard to understand; what then? Managers at one firm asked themselves how they could balance their clients' desire for at-home convenience and their need for on-the-spot support. They came up with a simple make-shift solution: conduct client sessions using web-based or mobile platforms such as Facetime or Skype so that a financial advisor could answer questions and observe them signing the document.

: Phase Three: Use Prototypes as Sample Solutions

Making an idea tangible involves creating a prototype. We often think of prototypes as sophisticated three-dimensional facsimiles of a car or some other highly engineered product that tests the functionality of an idea. That's not really what is required here. Think of your prototype as a prop that invites others to experience your idea and helps you refine an abstract concept into a meaningful product or service. Your prototype may be a sketch using papers and markers. It may be a skit in which you role-play how a process plays out. It doesn't matter if your organization provides a service rather than a product or if it's a government department. This is not an arts and craft exercise. It may be uncomfortable to step out of your comfort zone but once you start down this path you'll likely find it enjoyable and surprisingly productive.

What it looks like: A manufacturing company struggled with a sprawling yet chaotic staging warehouse. In the morning, trucks would arrive to pick up heavy inventory and tools before continuing on to different plant sites. But too often, equipment was not where it was supposed to be. Trucks would idle at the yard and be late at the plant site. Managers assumed it was simply a matter of improving organization. They prototyped a new logistics process and tested it with a role play, putting themselves in the shoes of the truck driver, crane operator, logistics person, and warehouse supervisor. The role play offered a surprising insight: the supervisor actually had an

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interest in maintaining the chaos, since it boosted his self-importance. As a result, the managers opted to give the supervisor higher-value work of managing inventory.

:: Phase Four: Sell the Solution with Stories

Finally, the best way to actually mobilize an innovative idea generated by design thinking is to inspire others to action through storytelling. And not just any story; the most effective ones are human — they express emotion — and capture the complexity of people interacting with a product, service, or process. In short, they make it personal. Classic storytelling principles never grow old: there is a beginning (what's the problem or opportunity?); a middle (what do we need to know about the problem?); and an end (what's the solution?). Don't forget the call to action: what do you want people to do after hearing your story?

What it looks like: Planners in one municipality set out to better understand how residents used city transit services. To do so, they created journey maps that visually told the story of several archetypical transit users, such as the salesperson on a call, the concert goer, the office worker. The maps revealed the decision making and travel experiences of these characters in a powerfully engaging way. The journey maps were compelling storytelling tools that managers used to communicate the proposed improvements with key colleagues in other departments and stakeholders. The maps triggered lively discussions and led transit officials to upgrade the mobile app to improve customer experience and simplify the payment process.

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The very simplicity of the design thinking process makes it easy to get into but there are predictable tension points as people move through the four phases. Based on what I've observed during my years of teaching design thinking, these are some of the internal conversations that participants struggle with.

I am not a creative person.

People naturally assume they have to be born creative or an extrovert to go through design thinking. The process does force participants to think with less inhibition. The performative aspect of design thinking is the toughest part for many people, particularly if they do not want to embarrass themselves in front of peers or supervisors.

In my experience, the design thinking framework, by laying out a series of steps to follow, takes away some of the mystery of the process and can be quite reassuring to those who may be uncertain of how they fit in. They may not be a smooth storyteller, for example, but they come to realize that they're not necessarily solving a problem so much as *learning* how to solve the problem, and that this is an opportunity worth trying. They are often surprised at their own ability to stand and deliver.

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I prefer not to waste time on crazy ideas.

Once insights are gathered during the first phase, some obvious first-order ideas quickly surface during the second phase. These are tempting low-hanging fruits that initially should be avoided. Many managers have the tendency to think: *These other ideas are too radical or flakey or are not feasible. Why should we even contemplate something that crazy or expensive or time consuming? Let's just cut to the chase.*

The point of the design thinking exercise is to push past the obvious solutions and uncover something truly innovative. It takes effort to go beyond conventional thinking to view a problem in a different way. Those skeptical and impatient managers may be right 80 percent of the time but 20 percent of the time they can come up with something quite novel if they are patient. They are looking for a silver bullet solution yet unwilling to let their imaginations come up with a silver bullet solution. This makes the second phase the most challenging of all.

I spend too little or too much time on a problem.

Those new to design thinking can struggle with calibrating just how much time to spend on identifying the true problem that needs attention. There are two issues. If group members are too familiar with the issues under consideration and a consensus quickly forms, they can be impatient to move on. In these situations, I point out to group members that even experts can be wrong. I challenge them to see a problem-solution as more of a hypothesis to test rather than a fact to accept.

Just as likely, an opposite situation can arise. A design thinking group can do a great job at gathering relevant information and either become paralyzed by too much research or fall into the trap of doing never-ending causal analysis. In these cases, setting a time limit is essential, particularly when going from phase one to phase two. Sometimes, you have to trust your intuition.

I don't feel leaders or peers will support this process.

A successful design thinking session rests on a foundation of organizational trust. When you go through such a process, you generate a lot of ideas, most of them fairly lame. In an innovative organization where generating divergent ideas is the norm, leaders understand the need to kill the bad ideas but not the people who come up with the ideas. In a traditional organization, this distinction may not be appreciated.

Senior managers don't have to go through the design thinking process themselves. But they should be aware and accepting of what is involved. They must understand the need to empathize with customers and users, which requires non-traditional ways to conduct research, and the need to fail in order to get better.

There is no denying that individuals can perceive some risk in engaging in this type of exercise. The beauty of design thinking is that it

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offers a time-tested framework to focus creative energies and a language around taking risks and practising innovation. That language helps people talk to one other about their shared experience and the confidence that what they're doing is not radical at all.

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