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*Peter Phillips, Corporate Identity and Design Strategy Consultant*

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# Lessons from the trenches: Insights from design management seminars

by Peter L. Phillips

*Reflecting on his career as a design manager and on three years of teaching corporate design management seminars, Peter Phillips articulates four insights he believes build rewarding design-business partnerships: value design as an asset that leverages corporate strategy; pinpoint the specific contributions of design to business objectives; nurture relationships rather than complete individual projects; and work “with” rather than “for” constituents.*



Peter Phillips, Corporate Identity and Design Strategy Consultant

What has come to be known as “professional development” in the corporate world takes on several meanings, depending on your area(s) of responsibility. For some managers and executives, it means pursuing an MBA at an accredited business school. For others, it is participation in extended “executive development” programs offered by various colleges and universities as part of their extension programs. Some simply attend seminars with titles like Training the Trainer, The Art of Negotiation, Conducting Effective Performance Reviews, and Accounting for Nonfinancial Managers. These programs have their merits, as well as their drawbacks.

Many design managers find participation in a full-time MBA program just too strenuous when added to the

already heavy demands of their jobs and their families. College or university extension “executive development” programs are typically easier to accommodate, because they are usually designed as a series of one-week residency programs over a course of a year or more. They do, however, tend to be pricey and are often scheduled at inconvenient times.

The Design Management Institute’s vision is “to improve organizations worldwide through effective management of design for economic growth.” Its mission: “to be the international authority, resource, and advocate on design management.”

To assure DMI achieves its vision and mission, the institute periodically surveys its membership to ask—in the words of a well-known former mayor

of New York City—“How am I doing?” The survey revealed that design managers wished especially for topic-specific seminars designed just for their profession. The one- to two-day variety seemed to be most popular, both for price and for minimizing time away from the office. I was asked to design and develop such a seminar, which would become the first in a series called the DMI Professional Development Program.

### **The corporate design management seminar**

We titled the course Managing the Corporate Design Department, and it was specifically for managers who felt they were considered a mere service group and were struggling to elevate design as a core competency.

It took about six months to design the seminar, and the process involved a number of people in several corporations. I consulted with professional course developers and industrial psychologists, as well as with design and non-design managers from several corporations. The process was very revealing for me, especially hearing from the non-design managers, who said

they did not understand design well and therefore did not value it. For their part, I found the design managers generally had very little formal business training. It was also clear that the most successful design managers *did* know how to clearly articulate the value of design and *did* know the role of design in business. These findings became the basis of the seminar.

One of the first things we do with our attendees is to ask them to make a short presentation to the group using two slides. On the first one, they are asked to provide a list of words (and images) that describe how they see themselves as managers of a design function. On the second, they use the same technique to report the way in which they believe they are perceived by their non-design-management colleagues.

For me, this has become one of the most critical and revealing aspects of the seminar. Not

once, in three years of teaching the seminar to hundreds of design managers, have I had anyone say: “I didn’t need the second slide; I am perceived by management exactly as I see myself.” It’s revealing because it clearly demonstrates the difficulty with which designers and design managers try to communicate the value of design.

The slide show has also shown me the reason for the difficulty. Designers tend to focus heavily on the merits of design as “a thing of beauty,” rather than as a solution to real business problems or opportunities.

Typically, the first list includes perceptions such as:

- I provide excellent design solutions.
- I am a mentor to my designers.
- I deliver quality work in very short time frames.
- I am able to work under great stress and pressure.
- I work with unrealistic budgets.
- Our group has done great, award-winning design, even in the absence of the proper tools.
- We provide excellent service to our clients.

The second list often includes:

- Management doesn’t understand our needs.
- I am considered a “necessary evil.”
- “They” don’t understand good design.
- I am looked at as an obstacle.
- “They” don’t understand how much time we need.
- “They” don’t give us realistic budgets.
- “They” never get us involved early enough in the process.

The disconnects become painfully obvious. Designers and design managers are not communicating their needs, or their value, in a way that “they” can understand. What I tell my students is that it is not “they” who are at fault. It is “we” who are the culprits. “We” are not communicating well.

### **A failure to communicate**

Why is this the case? What is it about the design profession that we are not good communicators, for heaven’s sake! Isn’t that part of what we do? I mean, aren’t we “visual communicators?” Of course we are. We just never learned to communicate design as an integral part of *business*.

*We call ourselves such things as Creative Services, Graphic Services, Design and Production, and—the absolute worst, in my mind—the Art Department*

Quite simply: We talk too much about aesthetics and not enough about the relevance of the design solution to the business problem (or opportunity).

At least a part of the responsibility for this phenomenon lies with design schools. When I studied design, a major part of the process was to learn to present our design solutions for each assigned project. But to whom did we present? Other design students, and design *teachers*—that’s who. We never learned how to present design solutions to nondesigners—businesspeople—our management in the corporate world, who are almost completely focused on such things as bottom line, market share, competitive advantage, increasing shareholder wealth, speed to market, and shortening the sales cycle.

Another factor I have found in the muddy trenches is that the design profession has for years been delighted to be perceived as a “service organization.” We call ourselves such things as Creative Services, Graphic Services, Design and Production, and—the absolute worst, in my mind—the Art Department.

I believe it was Paul Rand who said, “Design is a problem-solving discipline.” In my way of thinking, we should never call it “art.” An artist, by my definition, is someone who creates (hopefully) a thing of beauty—something to be seen and appreciated. But that creation is *personal*. It is self-expression. It is how the artist interprets the subject matter. It is not what I think of as design.

I believe that design is a problem-solving discipline. That means the process has to begin with a clear articulation of the problem, the desired results to be delivered by the design solution, and ultimately, an explanation of why the designer’s solution works. This is definitely not simply art. So, if we have an Art Department, Art Directors, Artists, and Graphic Services, why wouldn’t nondesigners think we are just clever folks who draw well? What’s in any of that art stuff that makes us a core business competency? If all we focus on in our presentations is aesthetics and beauty, why shouldn’t we be looked at as simply service providers? During my corporate career, the first thing I used to do was eliminate all references to art. I renamed my design group the Strategic Design Department.

### **Not a service department**

Ultimately, I also learned to eliminate all references to service. After all, every function in any organization, including the CEO and corporate attorney, provides some kind of service. But their departments are not generally called CEO Services or Legal Services. Rather, I would address my colleagues in the corporation as “strategic partners.” It is this rather simple change in mindset that begins to elevate design to the role of core business competency.

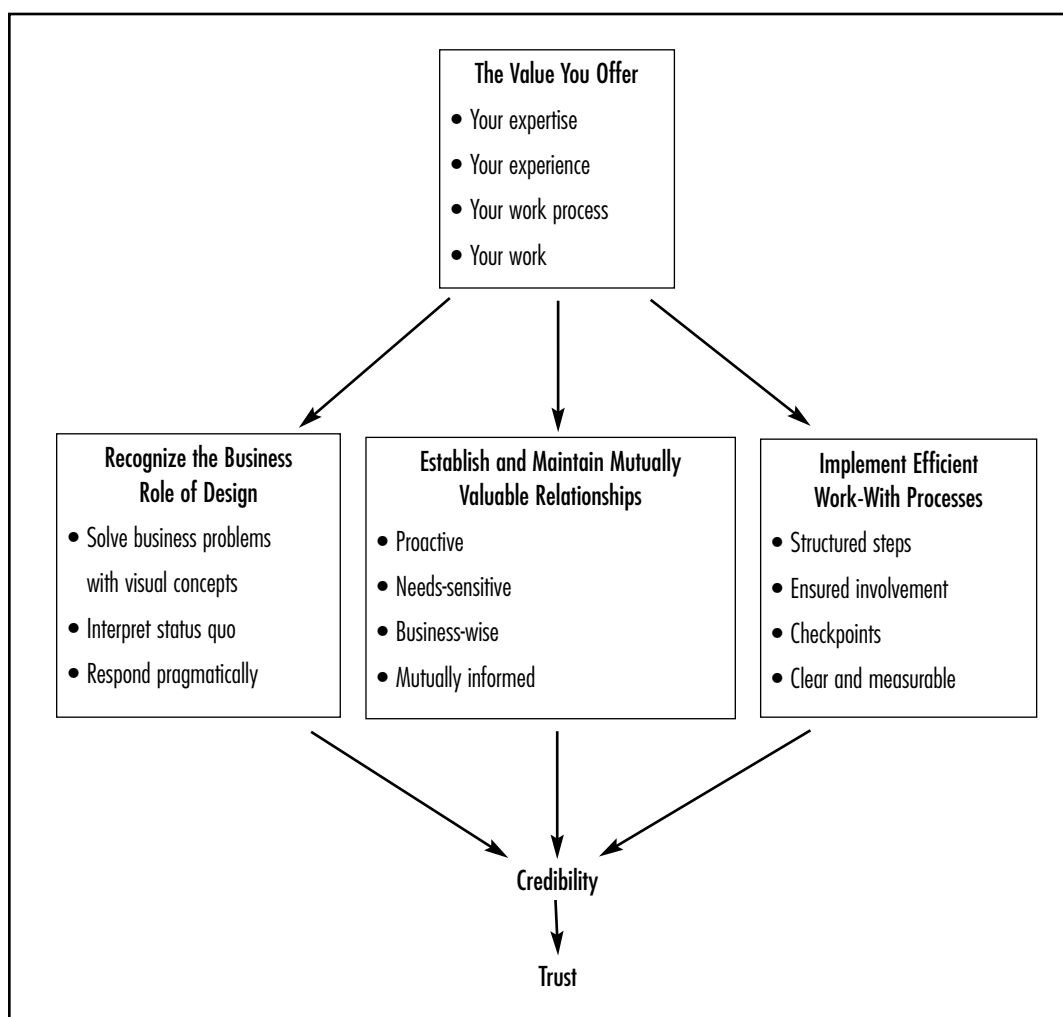
Design managers and designers want credibility and trust within the business world. They want their significant contributions recognized and valued. I believe that in order to accomplish this, design managers need to develop a personal action plan to proactively bring about the desired changes.

From my many conversations with both design and nondesign managers in the corporate world, I developed a model (see next page), which many of my students have told me actually does work for them. The model comprises the four most critical lessons I have found design managers need to learn.

### **Lesson #1—The value you offer**

This is probably the most critical aspect of my model. If design managers and designers are unable to clearly articulate the real value of design to an enterprise, no matter what it is, then nondesigners will not see its value either. There are really two “you’s” in all of this—you personally, and you the collective function of design. When I ask participants in the seminar to tell me in two minutes or less why design is a core competency in their company and why it should be valued as such, the usual response resembles something like terror. They know in their hearts that they are valuable; it’s just very hard for them to express it verbally. There is

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often a lot of stammering and fumbling, and then they report something like: “We make products attractive to our customers,” or, “Our work has won many design awards and brought recognition to the company.” Great stuff, but not enough to make CEOs or senior managers sit up and take notice. The other most common error is that their response to my question is almost always entirely about design itself rather than its effect on (and benefits to) the profitability of the company. To have credibility as a core business competency, design has to demonstrate that it adds strategic value to the success of the company. It can’t be just about aesthetics.

My recommendation is for design groups to brainstorm and determine their value to the business—in business terms. They need to have a design philosophy and process that advances the objectives of the *business*. Designers need to communicate their value in a manner that is both compelling and understandable.

#### **Lesson #2—**

##### **Recognize the business role of design**

Design is essential to almost every business. Certainly, no one could argue that product design and package design do not matter to businesses that rely on revenue from the sale of those products and packaged goods. Communication design, brochures, sales aids, and even Web sites are a bit more difficult for many business owners to see as absolutely essential to business success. It is in this latter area that most designers complain they are not valued enough. As a continuation of the value-you-offer discussion, design managers and designers need to quantify all the contributions of design to a healthy and prosperous business. They need to be able to articulate return on investment for various design activities—not just as an expense or, as some designers say, “a necessary evil”—but as an essential strategic resource to achieve the overall mission of the organization, no matter what it is.

### **Lesson #3—Establish and maintain mutually valuable relationships**

Those trenches I have been wandering in for the past few years are full of design folks who have been keeping pretty much to themselves. They are very comfortable dealing with each other, but not as comfortable working with the vast numbers of nondesigners in their companies. It seems obvious that this is the case because designers have not yet perfected this business of communicating the effectiveness of design rather than the sheer beauty of it all.

Design managers need to move out into the company and form alliances and partnerships. They need to develop support structures for the design function as a whole. As more people in the organization see design as a strategic resource rather than as a decorative service, the whining I hear from design groups will disappear. The reason design is not getting the funding, the time, or the resources it needs is because the design function has not brought its message clearly enough to the whole organization.

Design must become a real partner to other groups—not just a service group. This doesn't mean that the design function must *do* all the design in the company. The design group shouldn't be designing napkins for the cafeteria. However, it should be willing to be design consultants when the food services group wants to use the company logo on napkins, or plant security needs to design new forms. If design is a core business competency, it needs to be willing to provide competent design counsel to anyone and everyone in the organization.

### **Lesson #4—Implement efficient work-with processes**

This last core lesson seems to be troubling for many designers. I often hear designers say in class, “But these folks don't know anything about design. If I let them have too much to say, they will dictate what they want, rather than what is good design.”

True, true! In my corporate career, I had lots of folks bring in sketches of exactly what they wanted my group to simply *execute*. You have all heard it before. “I had in mind a light-blue background on the cover of the brochure (or the front panel of a package), with a big star in the lower-left corner. I want the logo really big, and the type should be really easy to read. Here's a

sketch I made of what it should look like.”

It's very easy to get frustrated, and even angry, when people approach designers in this manner. Keep in mind that they do this because, first, they see you as a service provider; and second, they aren't at all sure you really see (or understand) the perceived business need. Designers need to practice patience and work tactfully with these people to achieve business goals. (Note that I am saying “work with,” not “work for.”)

### **The big picture**

The trenches have taught me that if design is to have credibility and trust in the organization, designers need to learn how to communicate in a new way.

Designers need to be able to articulate the value of design, clearly and simply, in terms that are more about the benefits of design than the design itself. They need to study the business in depth and determine the roles of all kinds of design activity in that business. They need to consider what business

benefits come from excellence in design, and be able to relay that information to their nondesign colleagues. They also need to proactively develop partnerships and alliances throughout the organization in order to get the support and trust they so desperately want. Finally, design needs to be a true strategic business partner throughout the organization—working *with* people, not *for* people.

It is possible to bring design up out of the trenches and on to the main playing field of the organization, but it is up to the designers to make this transition. ■ Reprint # 02133PHI53

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