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Integrated Design Strategy Management: Challenges and Opportunities

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Integrated Design Strategy Management: Challenges & Opportunities

The following treatment was inspired by a lively roundtable discussion of some 35 designers and design managers at DMI's 2002 Annual Conference in Cape Cod. My original purpose here was to summarize the October 10 discussion, but it soon became apparent that, without a reliable transcript, my meager recapitulation wouldn't do justice to the richness and diversity of the exchange. Hence, what follows is a modest enlargement of my own notes as facilitator, including observations developed subsequent to, and inspired by, the roundtable.

Given design's universal nature and its many domain-specific expressions, I offer up Harold Simon's (1971) classic definition of Design (i.e., a problem-solving process whereby artifacts or offerings are structured to attain goals), to set the subject scope for the present discussion. Design problems cover a gamut, from circumstances in which problem givens, goals and obstacles may be relatively well known upfront, to domains and instances in which little is known for sure going in, and much has to be "creatively filled-in" to solve the problem.

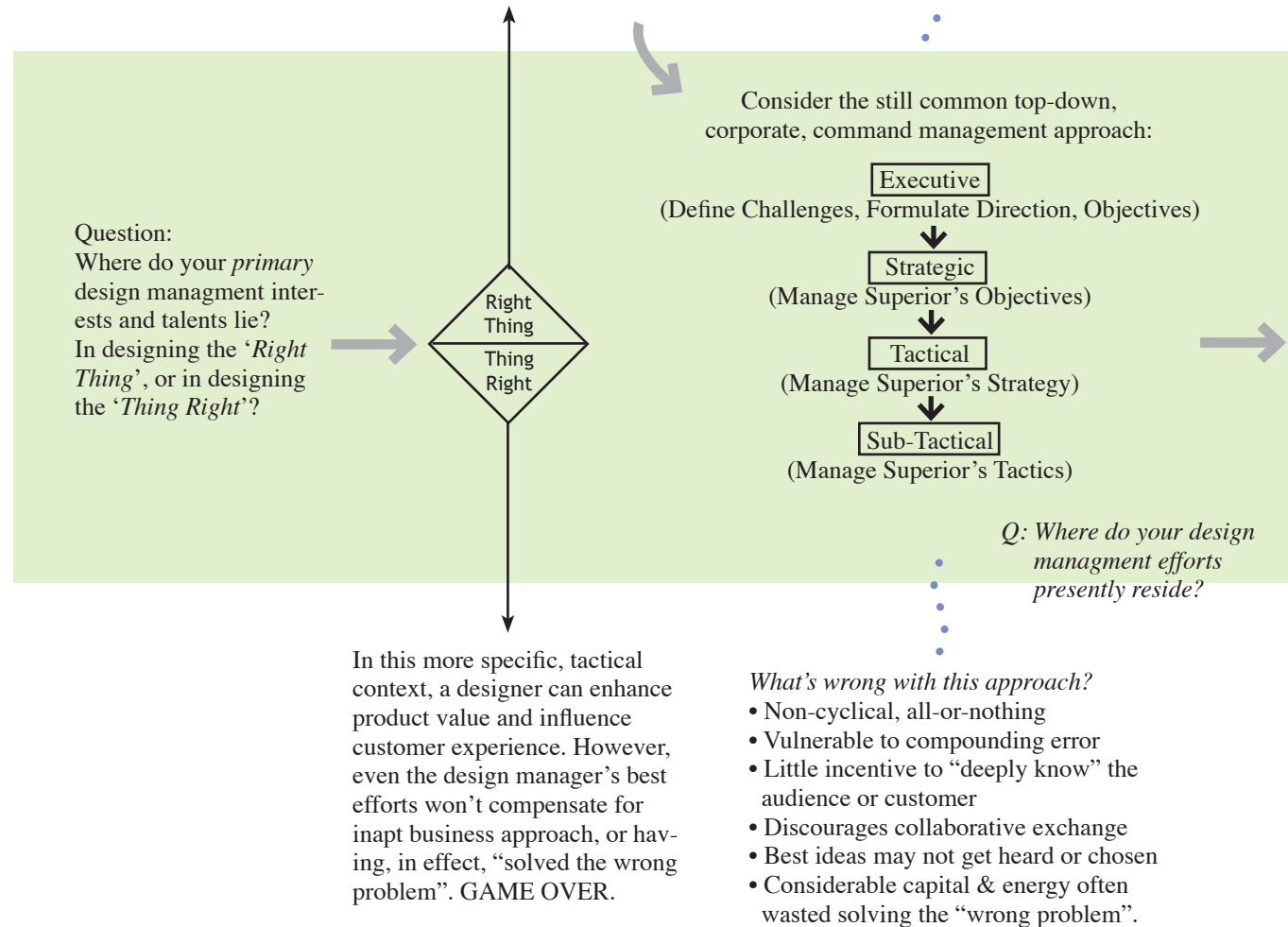
Designs can result in concrete artifacts, or extraordinarily complex and multi-layered experiences. Designs perceived as having strategic import tend to be more highly valued and have greater reach than designs having tactical or supporting relevance to the success of a large endeavor.

Despite Design's increasing strategic importance worldwide, management practices for deeply strategic design are not yet well established or widely acknowledged. This might lead mid-level design managers to ask what is strategic about their work, and how their influence might be enlarged? – Michael

Question: What are the boundaries of design?
Eames: What are the boundaries of problems?
(excerpt from Charles Eames' answers in *Design Q&A*, 1972)

In this more general strategic context, a design manager can have a voice in articulating challenges, framing market strategy and designing approaches, thereby influencing outcomes.

Many failed corporate endeavors and offerings can be laid at the feet of flawed market intelligence—a failure to understand the audience, and a lack of practical imagination in finding ways to integrate a system of offerings meaningfully into people's lives.

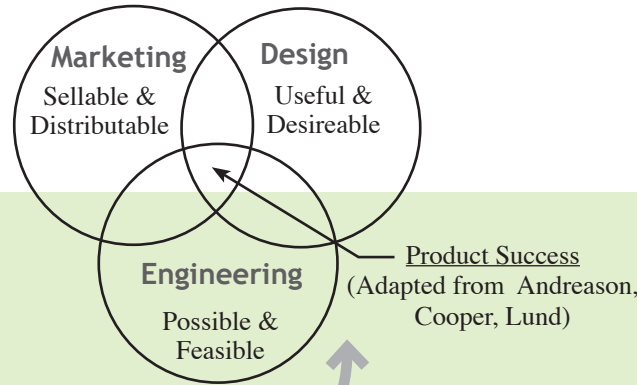


Consider the value of a business case based on a system of well researched, mutually supportive product/service interactions that make sense to people. Where offerings and their interactions are designed in such a way as to allow for easy opt-in, and compelling enough to retain customers.

(Watch out! Discipline, humility and maturity are prerequisites for this work. Such qualities are not likely earmarks of your company's current operating culture. Be patient, realistic, and work toward a track record of small successes.)

Look for points of leverage or influence (e.g., pain, pleasure, attention, energy) and design solutions and experiences around them that make a meaningful difference to people.

Many smart and successful businesses models are all about some form of integrated network strategy.



Build upon and invest in the essential knowledge and understandings that encompass your core value. Add expertise that complements your core.

Design thinking and practice are probably better suited to conceiving, planning and building human-centered, integrative offerings than any other business discipline (e.g., marketing, engineering).

What strategically influential position can Design rightfully occupy in business?

Where to begin? Where can a designer or design manager wanting to operate in a more strategic sphere start?

Any time a designer works with a client to formulate or redefine the presenting problem he/she is operating in strategic territory.

Armed with salient user research, the design manager can offer a unique and valuable strategic perspective to business. That perspective is not conventionally "macro" or market-based, but "strategically micro" and people-based. In other words, designers tend to focus intently and address deep structural human needs, wants and desires—a categorical substrate that bridges gender, culture, geography and time.

"A client comes to you with a definition of the problem, or ideas about what they want to accomplish. Sometimes they have a sophisticated view of it, sometimes they don't. I find myself frequently spending time with the client redefining the problem, backing up, going back to the beginning. Not infrequently the "problem" turns out to be a "symptom". You have to sometimes move back in order to move forward, to really understand what the nature of the solution should be." (Saul Bass)

Look beyond the immediately solvable problem. Frame the design challenge in the largest context you can manage. (Keeley)

Look for needs, not solutions: Needs last longer than any specific solution. Needs are a road map for development. Make research and design seamless. (Patnaik & Becker)

Project the principles and eminently sensible values of human-centered design outward and upward in the organization. Yours is a never-ending advocacy role. Design can address customer and product end-user relevancies in unique and detailed ways that Marketing simply doesn't. But don't make an enemy of Marketing.

Get informed about the science and art of Human Experience. It is key strategic terrain that designers should speak to most effectively. Employ imaginative and appropriate naturalistic human research to uncover key, richly textured information about your customer than nobody else in your organization listens for. Why? Because designs succeed or fail on the basis of their relevancy and connectedness to people. Explore deeply your audience to inspire your own creative insight and imagination.

Q: Wait a minute! What about examples of huge product success like the iMac? It didn't come about by means of vast, formal user research.

A: By all means, way to go Apple! The iMac derived from a team's creative imagination and savvy born out of vast cultural expertise in the psychology of desire. Knowing what's useful and very cool is at the heart of strategic, human-centered design.

Q: What management style works to the advantage of Design? (pragmatic, determined, sense of humor, connective, integrative, rigorous, creative, curious)



Q: What management style works against Design? (Arrogant, inflexible, isolated, impatient, cynical, territorial)

Consider the possibility of evolving over the next 20 years to function, in effect, as a "meta-designer". The form of Design management you practice in 2020 will likely be very different from the domain skills you learned originally in design school. Core Design principles will endure, be added upon, and likely appropriated by other fields trying to tap into their power.

Some questions to spark further discussion:

Q: To what extent are strategic design management principles being practiced (and under what names) in 2003. What are the prospects of wide-scale acceptance of such principles and practices in business school culture?

Q: How strategically influential can Design become to business generally?

Q: How attractive is the notion of operating in a truly strategic management capacity (with its attendant advantages and requirements) to practicing designers today?

Q: Which industries and management disciplines have the most to gain (or lose) from a "strategic embrace" of Design?

Avoid too narrowly defining your expertise, or clinging to "truths" and conventions you learned in school that no longer hold. Design can be the powerfully "connective tissue" bridging many business functions and disciplines. Design doesn't "belong" to you. Building Design into a program of strategic corporate assets will likely require as much change in you as in your organization's evolving (if reluctant) acceptance of Design's value.

Who functions as a strategic design manager, or "meta-designer"? Try this on for size: One who guides or participates in the ongoing formation of teams, systems and processes to deeply understand an audience. Then couples such knowledge to creatively conceive, design and plan a system of integrated artifacts, offerings or experiences that come to be accepted as part of the audience's natural way of living and manner of understanding their world.

Q: Estimate if and when an elite design manager will emerge as a senior executive of a major corporation?

Q: Which business schools are predisposed and best equipped to sponsor a formal, ongoing and widely respected MBA program in Design Management?

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