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What is a Design Attitude and Why Would a Manager Care?

By Fred Collopy

Becoming a professional includes cultivating certain attitudes. And part of what it means for managers to be designers in addition to being analysts, leaders, and deciders is to cultivate an attitude that complements the attitudes they have developed in those other roles. In the opening chapter of *Managing as Designing* (Stanford University Press 2004), Dick Boland and I summarized Nobel laureate Herbert Simon's arguments for cultivating such an attitude.

"To summarize Simon's argument very briefly, humans have a limited cognitive capacity for reasoning when searching for a solution within a problem space. Given the relatively small size of our brain's working memory, we can only consider a few aspects of any situation and can only analyze them in a few ways. This is also true of computers, although the constraints are less obvious. The problem space that a manager deals with in her mind or in her computer is dependent on the way she represents the situation that she faces. The first step in any problem-solving episode is representing the problem, and to a large extent, that representation has the solution hidden within it (pp. 8-9)."

In an article recently published in *Organization Studies* ("Uncovering Design Attitude: Inside the Culture of Designers," 2008, pp. 373-392), Kamil Michlewski reports on interviews that he did with 14 people at IDEO, Philips Design, Nissan Design and Wolff Olins. His interview subjects had training in industrial and interaction design (nine of them) and management (three); one studied experimental psychology and computer science and another was an historian and entrepreneur. The goal of the interviews was to ascertain the characteristics of a design attitude. In coding the interviews he came up with five core categories or themes. Taken together they provide an interesting picture of what it means to take on a design attitude.

The first theme is related to the role that designers play in consolidating and reconciling contradictory meanings and objectives. This includes blending the analytic and synthetic or balancing deep humanistic understandings with technical considerations. He quotes a senior director at Philips Design:

"Designers themselves are actually managing all the constituent parts, and therefore managing the connection and the connected contributions of all the constituent

disciplines in solving any problem or creating a landscape for exploring further problems or further opportunities, further possibilities of growth (p. 378)."

The second theme, creating and bringing solutions to life, will be immediately familiar to most observers of design. Moving from the intangibles that are the typical starting point of designs to things that delight people and make them feel good requires rapid and inexpensive prototyping and visualization. As a senior manager at IDEO put it: "Really important is this bringing things to life, being able to build prototypes, do it fast so that you don't invest a lot of time and money into something that's not what you want it to be (p. 380)."

What managers seem to find most disquieting about designers is their tendency to embrace discontinuity and open-endedness. Environments that encourage these are seen as jeopardizing commercial objectives. Michlewski observed that this attitude might be a consequence of designers searching for perfect solutions and noted the importance of Karl Weick's observation that "the trick in designing is to stop while the design still has life."

A management consultant had quite a positive response to how designers engage multiple senses in aesthetic experiences, the fourth theme.

"You're blue on your face trying to explain a positioning strategy, a vision. I mean what is a vision?…You're there, in front of a room trying to explain it and you have used all the analytics. You've analyzed, you've talked about customers, competitors and they're nodding as you use words. And then, suddenly, you bring a visual and the whole room lights up. And that's very special!"

The final theme was one that most managers will embrace: engaging personal and commercial empathy. The interviewees held a view of designers not at odds with commercial interests but playing a role that reduces tensions. Their human-centeredness leads designers to engage in "listening and dialogue as a means to reaching customers' hidden needs (p. 384)."

Taken together the five themes describe an attitude oriented toward acting to create a future that is somehow better. This is done through exploration, often setting aside authority and past experience. "The spirit of challenge and exploration is what designers bring to their workplace (p. 385)" concludes Michlewski.

Who wouldn't want to be a part of that?