

FAST COMPANY

03.26.09

As Designers and Managers Think About Each Other—A Provocation

By Fred Collopy

I wrote this as a provocation for a workshop that will take place this week-end at the Weatherhead School.

To what extent do fourth order design, design thinking, integrative thinking, and similar extensions of the notion of designing represent conceptual mechanisms for managers, management educators, and business consultants to co-opt the design community's unique position as an innovative force, perhaps *the* innovative force in businesses?

This is a question of some importance. Many who attempt to address the question assert that designers have a unique set of skills that enable (and entitle) them to do the designing. Others assert that management, having reached the limits of its reliance upon analytic thinking and a worldview that takes decision-making as the highest form of value creation, is grasping for a new value proposition. One they find in the notions of innovation and design. These and similar observations produce an understandable skepticism about what we are up to.

If we are to move beyond this we must address several matters head on. The first has to do with the centrality of values to any honest design activity. Design is an activity of individuals. A design is inevitably a reflection of the designers who produced it. And that means that in some significant measure it is the product of those designers' values. Some transparency about how those values are learned, articulated, challenged and appreciated will be required if institutions that have "created a generation of monsters" (as one participant on a discussion list recently put it) are to find a respected place in design discussions.

A second matter that will require some attention is the role of power in these expanded design processes. Who do managers/designers serve? By one view that has had broad currency in management education for at least a generation managers are the servants of the stockholders. A similarly focused view, which has a prominent place in discussions of industrial and graphic design, is that designers serve the customers. A somewhat more embracing view would see us all as serving an expanded community of stakeholders. But there have been few discussions, at least in management

classrooms, about how broadly stakeholders might reasonably reach. To humanity? The earth? Seven generations? And then some?

Another, more micro, issue of power will arise as the design world responds to the invitation to teach the rest of us how they do what they do. Will designers thereby hand over the keys to their kingdom, enabling managers to do the whole innovation thing on their own? Or perhaps even worse, will the newly educated and trained managers use the 'real' designers as mere functionaries? And what is the *quid pro quo* to be?

The great designer Karl Gerstner has said: "Design must not be understood as an activity reserved to artists. It is the privilege of all people everywhere."

With privilege comes responsibility.