Making Meaningful Things Together: Working Towards a Mature Business

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Sometimes people create conflicts during a project that only serve to get in the way of making meaningful things together. Or in other words, unnecessary and petty battles make work not fun and not productive.

But why would people create such conflict?

Perhaps a project was plagued by one, all, or some of the following factors: requirements were not collected or understood clearly, the core of the offering was not defined properly, there was too much distance between the customer and the project goals, too much money had been spent already for the project to fail, or it could be as simple as people just not knowing how to get along. All of these factors can make an environment of fear and uncertainty that prevents people from working together to create wonderful products and services.

What elements of a project should we all be thinking about to help bring people together to make meaningful things together?

Define the Core of What You Make

Good energies for a project can be derailed quickly if people do not feel they have a clear understanding of why they are working on something. Opinion wars escalate if there is no customer involvement to better understand their needs now and over time, and additional features are often added to support egos and opinions without grounding it in evidence of what customers actually need.

It is important for everyone on the team, independent of their discipline, to have a clear idea of what the core features and value proposition of a product or service is: what is the primary reason a customer would want to buy, rent, or subscribe to a product or service; how customers will go about completing their goals; and how the product or service can better serve the customers and the business over time.

Understand Your Customer

People tend to make up assumptions about customers, bringing in their own bias, ego, and opinions about what they think the customer needs. Poorly formed personas do not help the design process if they lack real stories to form a collection of evidence over time to understand the needs, motivators, behaviors, and habits of customers.

Unless there is a firm plan to understand people, including business stakeholders and customers, people will make up what they think customers need, which can produce incorrect requirements and wasted design and development time.

Sometimes there are also so many versions of "customer truth" floating around a business that it's hard to know who really has a full and complete understanding of the customer. Actual customer data is relevant, but some so-called customer data that is based on false assumptions and opinions helps no one. While opinions can be important, we need to balance opinion with real data from our customers' own voice to get clarity on customer needs. To make informed business and design decisions, we need to ensure that we attribute the data that we discover correctly and verify that it maps to other data. Reliable research requires business investment. We can no longer rely on old methods of discovering customer needs or rely on numbers alone to capture human needs, motivations, and behaviors. It is more important to understand and discover human needs and motivations than it is to understand statistical data.

To that end, we need to get out of our cubicles, get out of the building, and learn how our products and services fit into real people's lives. To communicate our understanding of human needs, we need to capture rich stories in the voice of the customer, as well as photos and videos. We must encourage businesses to foster constant curiosity about how they can serve people better.

Know the customer and if you don't know, seek ways to find out.

See the Project Artifacts to Connect a Narrative

Communication is hard work and clear communication is even harder work. Important requirements are lost in documents when they are not visible.

Project artifacts can be described as posters that are placed on walls in project spaces so that people can visibly see what they are working on and why. Examples can include the project purpose, customer profiles, design principles, journey maps, assumptions, questions, the core design principles and objectives, task models, and designs (from sketches to concepts to finished designs) to name a few.

Project artifacts need to connect together in order to form a narrative about how a customer interacts with the business and how the designs and improvements to the design can help the customer. Unfortunately project artifacts are often not understood and not visible. These artifacts serve to help people on the project be able to understand the narrative and to better understand their role in that narrative. Project artifacts create a common language where team members from different disciplines can reflect often on the designs that are right in front of them with the intention to iteratively improve the design direction over time and so the team can chart their course.

Inform Design Through Customer Stories and Sensemaking With the Team

Having a regular routine to understand your customers implies that customer stories were collected and brought into a space (see artifacts) where the team can make sense of them together. By transferring these stories into bits of valuable and accurate information and using sensemaking techniques through asking questions and using various discipline lenses to have multidiscipline conversations, the design of a product or service becomes well-informed, not random and inaccurate. The outcome of collecting this data helps map product and service features and solutions to customers' actual needs and desires.

Applying this customer data to inform design decisions through sensemaking is not a one-off activity and not just the responsibility of user research or the user experience lead, but should

be a constant of doing business. Without it, a business will simply not be able to innovate over time.

Share Observations About a Context

When sharing observations about customer and stakeholder behaviors, a team should come together to read the stories to absorb them into their collective memory. This routine enables a team to identify surprising or deeply memorable situations that deserve further analysis by the whole team. Sharing the stories with other team members and groups allows for a broader interpretation of those stories that can help in making sense of their observations and determining what artifacts would give their observations and insights life.

Once a team has a routine of sharing these stories, they can list their assumptions and discuss their source and the evidence available to support them, and either challenge or accept assumptions or sets of assumptions based on the insights gained from sharing customer observations. This helps a team to prioritize certain features by determining what features deserve more of the team's time, focus, and attention and what features require more research or further design iterations.

Give People Time to Think

Delivering projects against a static set of requirements without a break to reflect on the project from a clear outlook is a sure way to lose perspective and innovation. People need the necessary time and space to be able to look beyond the current work in progress and reflect how a product or service could look in the future. Part of this implies allowing people to get away from their computers and desks and encouraging conversations away from the project. Giving people time to think can provide the opportunity to tackle problems with a fresh mind.

Encourage Open and Honest Conversations Towards Creativity

Some of the best project conversations seem to happen outside of meetings. Perhaps part of the reason this happens is that people are afraid to share their feelings and opinions in meetings or the meetings aren't facilitated well. We need to encourage teams to have open and honest conversations and to be ok with saying "I don't know."

Businesses sometimes see creativity as the primary responsibility of the artists and designers who work for them. They often misunderstand creativity, limiting it to making things pretty, or try to fix designs without the necessary thinking that should happen beforehand.

But creativity is much more.

Elements of creativity include giving people in business the spaces, time, and tools to explore new ideas. The goal should be to discover better ways of arriving at ideas and capturing the outputs of our conversations. The lack of creativity in a business hurts it to the degree that the designs of its products and services look the same as others, making them increasingly commoditized.

Get Inspired by the People on Your Team

Businesses are often conservative by nature and avoid taking risks. But the world needs big thinkers and big dreamers—people who are willing to look beyond the day-to-day operations and current constraints and look for ways to inspire.

Inspiration comes from people, so businesses need to attract and invest in people who can dream big. In addition to attracting the talent, they need to create cultures that encourage and nurture this way of thinking. Businesses need to take a deeper look at the skill sets they'll require to prosper in the future.

Know Your Project Roles

Some of our work requires that we focus our minds and delve deeply into design details, while other work requires us to take a step back to see how the elements of our work connect with one another in delivering solutions to well-identified needs that are part of a broader narrative.

As members of project teams, we can play an important role in helping our teams to work more effectively by advancing ideas and recognizing when it's time to consider alternative approaches.

Teammates may play the following roles:

- Facilitator: As facilitators, we can define approaches to guiding the process of informing, sensemaking, and evaluating. We can craft agendas for working sessions and identify what problems need attention. We can manage interactions between functions, aggregate a team's learnings, and map these learnings to shared artifacts. We can identify themes that require further study and set goals for the team's next working sessions.
- Mentor: As mentors, we should be aware of approaches and skills that require ongoing development and practice and organize safe spaces in which people can practice them—using them over and over again during working sessions and across projects. Mentors should work closely with facilitators and custodians to identify the knowledge that the team has captured and map it to a learning program for team members, with a focus on informing, sensemaking, and evaluating.
- Connector: As connectors, we connect people's skills and roles and create artifacts that help bridge gaps and make interactions between people feel more fluid.
- Custodian: As custodians, we maintain the knowledge base that forms over time and leverage it in creating approaches and courses that help our teammates on projects to get better at what they do.

Being Human

Our human qualities can help or hinder our ability to get great stories. These qualities include the following, in no particular order: respecting, seeing, listening, probing, feeling, synthesizing, playing, leading, mentoring, facilitating, connecting, collaborating, critiquing, communicating, constructing, deconstructing, framing, envisioning, and persuading. Our ability to dip into and rise above these human qualities or to expand and contract as necessary is important. It's equally important to have safe forums in which to practice these qualities, which help us in the context of our practice.

Implications for Personal Learning and a Mature Business of the Future

Through each project experience and all of the interactions between people in different functions on a project or across projects, it is important to reflect on our skills and practices and maintain an awareness of the need to apply the skills and practices we described earlier as we seek to improve and gain maturity in our business purpose and mission.

So … what does a mature business of the future really look and feel like?

Acknowledgements

About the Authors

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He has lectured about usability, user-centered design, and user experience globally. He co-wrote *The Usability Kit*, an implementation guide providing best practices and guidelines for usability teams, and he published a book on Global UX with Whitney Quesenbery.

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