

# Challenges in Leading and Managing Design Teams

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## INTRODUCTION

Today, design has become an indispensable part of every business. It features in various aspects of the business, such as its image, branding, corporate identity, advertising, new product development, communication, websites, marketing and other Internet-based systems. It plays a critical role in the manufacturing businesses wherein the industrial designers develop the concepts for manufactured products such as home appliances, toys, automobiles, medical devices and more. Besides physical artifacts, they also design the experiences associated with the use of the products and systems.

Industrial designers follow a creative process to problem-solving and innovation. They combine art, science and business to devise products and systems that people use in daily life (Lawson, 2006; Oakley, 1984). They follow an artistic, haphazard, yet recognizable approach to problem solving. Designers follow a human-centred approach to explore the possibilities of technology in order to meet the needs of the people for the success of the business (Hevner & Chatterjee, 2010). Their creative approach is similar to that of music composers, creative writers and sculptors (Fletcher, 1990).

Rationality and creativity are two entirely different mental processes and they are generally in conflict (Fletcher, 1990). While designers follow a creative and free-flowing approach, the business management and other functions aim to be more structured and sequential in their process. On the one hand, designer's creative personality and amorphous working style enables them to address complex problems; on the other hand, it may pose several challenges when it comes to managing them in the context of a business (Oakley, 1984; Yong, 1994; Henry, 2001). The chapter highlights some of the key challenges that lie in managing design teams, particularly the industrial design teams working in the consumer durables sector. It also recounts several experiences and observations based on the author's decade-long experience in practicing and managing Industrial design across consumer durables sector.

## DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF DESIGNERS

### How Designers Think

Designers belong to those creative professionals who rely upon using the right sides of their brains. De Bono (1992) terms this as "lateral thinking", in contrast with the left-brain activity known as "vertical thinking", which is a more logical and structured way of reaching a solution. The left-brain-dominated

professionals work in a step-by-step, algorithmic and structured way, and are therefore less prone to error. On the contrary, the right-brainers are lateral thinkers, who oppose logical step-by-step thinking. They rely on discontinuous and irrational thinking and have their own logic structures (De Bono, 1992; Fletcher, 1990). Creative professionals in art and design are right-brainers, which makes them naturally creative. To address a problem, creative professionals look for “what is different, makes deliberate jumps, welcomes chance intrusions, and explores the least likely” (De Bono, 1992). Gordon (1961) adds that the natural tendency of the mind is to work in a logical and ordered way; in contrast, the creative professionals (the right-brainers) work in a more haphazard and illogical way (Fletcher, 1990).

Creative personalities such as designers are different from the left-brain thinkers. Researchers have characterized that the creative personalities are independent, highly energetic and enthusiastic, work-motivated, and non-conformist (Shapero, 1985). In addition, they are often attributed with passion and commitment, which continuously drives them to become innovative and to differentiate themselves from others. A Study at the School of Art Institute of Chicago showed that art students are comparatively introspective, radical, socially aloof, experimental and non-conformist (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1976). They are usually lost in the moment and tend to forget the past and future. They are totally absorbed in their thoughts to find a solution.

Furthermore, the creative professionals such as designers are highly optimistic. This optimism comes from the belief in oneself, which inspires them to think creatively. While self-belief can make designers stubborn in their opinions and ideas, it fuels them with the ability to take risks and think freely out of the box (Cross, 2011). Besides this, they are highly passionate about their profession. Their strong motivation towards the creative process drives them to work for their passion rather than corporate goals. They are less moved by the incentives and more by their inner urge for creativity (Shapero, 1985). They do not treat their design project as a job task; rather, they take it as an opportunity to gratify their passion. For them, design is like a meditation or a therapy; it gives them immense satisfaction and confidence when they are able to produce a creative order from the chaos. Like an artist, designers put their heart and soul in their creative work to deliver an ever more unique and competitive solution. Their passion also drives their commitment towards perfection (Lawson, 2006). Even when focused on the smaller tasks, designers want to attain perfection in terms of quality and creativity which is able to meet their own standards (Fletcher, 1990). They even compromise with time and money to gratify their inner quest for a more satisfying outcome.

Being a right-brainer differentiates the creative personalities from the majority of the left-brainers in an organization (Fletcher, 1990). While this inherent nature of creative personality is certainly beneficial for an organization, it also has the potential to cause clashes of views between the business and the designer (Yong, 1994).

### **How Designers Work**

The unique mindset of designers is reflected in their style of working, which deviates significantly from those working in other functions of an organization (Fletcher, 1990). Whether in a corporate setting or a consulting studio, designers usually work in teams, wherein they brainstorm and share their ideas with fellow designers. Such informal discussions allow them to build multiple perspectives while conceiving a solution (Cross, 2011). Even though they work in teams, surprisingly, each designer has his own unique

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