

Design Leadership: What's Next?

Author : Thomas Lockwood

Date : November 23, 2015



DESIGN HEADS AT 3M, INTUIT, MICROSOFT, PEPSICO, PHILIPS, AND REI HIGHLIGHT 7 AREAS FOR FUTURE DESIGN LEADERS TO CONSIDER.

The importance of corporate **design** leadership is growing fast, which makes me curious: what does the future of **design** leadership look like? Will this upward momentum continue, and if so, what are the skills needed for future **design** leaders? To find out, I asked the heads of **design** at **3M**, **Intuit**, **Johnson & Johnson**, **Microsoft**, **PepsiCo**, **Philips**, and **REI** individually and as a panel at the [Industrial Designers Society of America](#) national conference. Like a **design** project, I then looked for patterns and synthesized findings.

1. REMAIN DRIVEN TO DESIGN

First and foremost, keep true to your roots in **design**. Coincidentally, all of these **design** leaders came up thru **design**, and still consider themselves **designers**, not administrators. Passion about **design** is at the core of the most effective **design** leaders. I'm not suggesting the prima-donna style super **designers**, like in the fashion industry, but there is a core element of first knowing the craft side of **designing**.

"Once a **designer** always a **designer**," says Eric Quint, chief **design** officer at **3M**. "We need to keep that affinity as a **designer**. As **design** leaders you must respect the fact that you are a good **designer** first. You need to be a good practitioner first, to inspire the other **designers**. Your role is to amplify your influence." And Nasahn Sheppard, vice president of product **design** at REI says that even as a VP you have to be true to your **design** roots: "You have to show up as your authentic self. You have to be you. If you don't love what you do your not going to do a very good job of it. And it starts here, in your heart, and that's where it radiates out from."

"It's about differentiation, how do you know when **design** is at the table?" says **Steve Kaneko**,

partner director of **design** at **Microsoft**. "At the end of the day we are form givers—a product, an experience—**design** is what touches people. So at the end of the day it's either beautiful and useful or not. Everything we have learned as artists in terms of form-giving is what we bring to the table. Physical objects, stories, experiences. We own the final spec. At the end of the day we are artists, that have to make magic happen."

According to Klaus Kaasgaard, vice president of user experience **design** at Intuit, **design** leaders need to, "engage every day in very specific **design** discussions. Go very deep on product critiques, as well as very broad on **design** strategy and product strategy."

Shawn Carney, chief **design** officer and executive vice president at Philips agrees. "We have to maintain the craft based edge of **design**," he says. "Our role is to be creative, I don't want to underestimate this. It's our secret sauce, creativity is the magic dust, that ability to see things from another perspective. The ability to think outside the box."

2. HAVE EMPATHY FOR INTERNAL PEERS

We all know how important empathy for the end user is, but **design** leaders also focus empathy toward internal peers as well. In other words, rather than pushing **design**, savvy **design** leaders seek to understand the needs of other business functions, and then create solutions to meet those needs.

"We have a specific advantage that no other function has: we own the tool to transform an idea into a reality," **Mauro Porcini**, chief **design** officer at **PepsiCo** says. "The ability to prototype and story tell, to get to market with a product, a service or a **brand**. This is something no other function has. We only need to think like partners. In any corporation there are silos, but we can be connected from the bottom of the pyramid all the way to the top, and drive solutions across the organization."

3M's Quint put it this way: "The empathy we use to make great products and solutions? If we use a bit more of that empathy across the company we would be much more successful in driving strategic solutions for the company...it is extremely important you understand that **design** is part of a chain. So you have to get insights from **marketing**, business, research, etc., and you are a translator. As soon as you see you're part of a chain, then you understand the need for the connections. And by the way, often other departments don't know how to interface with **design**."

Philips's Carney sees empathy as a crucial part of today's tech ecosystem. "With big data, and internet of things, everything is connected real time, and we need to collaborate with other disciplines," he says. "**Design** is bigger than just **designing**."

3. BE MIXED-MEDIA SAVVY

Once upon a time **design** leaders represented specific disciplines. Not so any more. We need to think in terms of converging disciplines. According to **Microsoft's Kaneko**, "Between interaction **design**, visual comms, industrial **design**, and the world of sensors and

environments, this requires a level of scale and scope, a convergence of physical, **digital** and sensory experiences. We're in the business of partnering to build cohesive experiences."

Design also connects the dots between individual products and services to broader customer experiences. "We need to think about **design** as an interaction—the need for interaction **design** across all things," **Intuit's Kaasgaard** says. **3M's Quint agrees**: "We don't highlight it as **design**, but as experience. So this way we align the desired experience." **Carney** puts it another way. "Very few things will be free-standing in the future, all are part of a wider ecosystem, so **designers** have to think bigger than the individual item to create systems," he says.

As in the past, creativity and **innovation** remain core to **design** leadership. In the future, creating business value will matter just as well as sharp **design**. Whether developing new products, services, **brands**, environments or business models, the end goal is to create value to the triple bottom line—economic, **social**, and environmental. Which means, developing meaningful solutions. "We must craft and create meaningful experiences," **PepsiCo's Porcini** says. "So essentially we are creating meaning. The center is your **brand**, the content is the **brand** purpose, the receiver is your user, customer or employees, and the media is every touch point of the **brand**. The **brand** is the media. The code is how we talk, the visual code, the aesthetic, and so on. So we as **designers**, we own the code, **marketing** owns the content, we need to collaborate. **Design** can **design** the story—to prototype the product and experiences."

"SELFLESSNESS COMES ACROSS IN A MUCH MORE POWERFUL WAY."

4. CREATE CORPORATE CULTURES TO INTEGRATE

The future is not about building kingdoms of **design**, it's about integrating **design** and **design** thinking throughout business. This requires savvy communication and change management skills, and being a team player—after all, **design** is a team sport. Partnering with OD and HR can help smoothe the way. "Our job as a leader is to connect with the other people," **Microsoft's Kaneko** says. "It's less about us, it's about the business, and the customer and what we're trying to do for the rest of the world. It can become ego-centric, but selflessness comes across in a much more powerful way, and is a much stronger way to build an organization."

Quint, of **3M**, agrees: "**Design** is very much about how a company works. You can tremendously impact a company, and the world. There are many opportunities to build cultures of **design** in many many companies. In order to connect, you need empathy to understand the world of **marketing** and business and strategy."

REI's Sheppard elaborates. "You're trying to create an enterprise that thinks about **design**," he says. "So think about how you can make other parts of the enterprise successful. The more you can connect the more you can make other areas successful, not just **design**, this is critical."

Porcini agrees. "The other functions are your partners," he says. "**Marketing** has an advantage

because they own the relation with the customer and consumer. They can get things to market. By nature **design** can not get to market, so by nature we are a collaboration function. So use **design** as the collaborative. We were trained to be collaborative, to be storytellers. By definition we are connectors and facilitators so use us in this way. The **design** organization is the advocate of the consumer. If that's our role, we have a responsibility to create solutions that are meaningful and that are sustainable. My wish for the chief **design** officer of the future would be the chief activist."

In the end, it's really about developing a culture of **design**, but this takes time and discipline. "It takes patience and stamina; it's not going to happen overnight," 3M's **Quint** says. "Driving **design** in a large enterprise is not a sprint, it's a five-to-10-year program that you drive. And if you drive that program you should drive it like a **design** project, with clear stages and objectives, and match the program."

"Everything around us is made," **Sheppard**, of REI, says. "We live in a constructed world. So **design** is all around us—we need to open the aperture. Not just shareholder value, I propose we think about what is our shared values. Get to the answer of 'why.' Why does this matter, why does anyone care?' We need to get to that truth, then you can extend that truth to build a platform the entire enterprise can stand on, not just **design**."

5. DESIGN THINKING THE FUTURE

The great thing about **designers** is that we create the future of products, services, and experiences. The great thing about **design** thinking is that we create the future of anything. The key is just determining the right problems to solve. "One of the core areas **design** can contribute is knowing what questions to ask," says **Microsoft's Kaneko**.

Design thinking has taken hold, no doubt, with significant benefits to business. **Intuit's Kaasgaard** advises emerging **design** leaders to "focus on building organization capabilities. Teach the organization about **design** thinking—both on individual **design** projects, and on seating strategy and business strategy. At the end of the day you need to focus on building the organization capabilities, so that the organization will think like a **designer**. **Design** is not just a department, it's a mindset." He went on: "At Intuit we've established a **design** thinking method. We have 1,200 trained **innovation** catalysts. Now this three-day class does not make you a **designer** but it does help spread that way of working and thinking into the business."

Although companies in Europe seem to have been slow in adopting **design** thinking as business practice, Philips is ahead of the curve, Carney says. "We renamed our **design** thinking program to call it 'co-create', because that's exactly what we do," he says. "It's about building, testing, learning. We use it in the business to engage with some big hairy problems. Pulling in the **CEO** and the C-suites, we use **design** thinking and co-create tools; we **design** the conditions, we give them the components. And we need to extend this to all functions. I think **design** thinking and creativity are too precious to confine within the **design** organization."

So too at 3M, **Quint** says: "We have a role much beyond making things. Let's think about the

future and imagine what that could encompass. The job of **design** is to stretch, to be a stretch agent. To go to for the next scenarios. So I think the **design** leader is a visionary, a bit of a lighthouse, to help explore what the company could look like. It's a very important task of the **design** organization as well."

Microsoft's Kaneko points out that there is another side of **design** thinking. "Lay people are going to be **designing** things, like it or not, so we have to create the conditions for **design**, not just artifacts."

"We also mix up **design** and **design** thinking," Quint adds. "'**Design** thinking' is a word, that like '**innovation**,' is over-used. I refer to **design** thinking as unlocking value. It is a tool, not owned by **design**, but used across functions to help get that multidisciplinary problem solving going."

6. DESIGN YOUR CAREER

Your career is the one **design** brief you can fully control, so seize the moment. "You should write your own personal brief," **Kaasgaard** says. "We're all custodians of our own life."

Sheppard puts it this way: "It starts with being an authentic you. Always ask yourself what are you becoming. Re-think and push our own boundaries on what you are and what you can do. Think big—we can push beyond what is in front of us today—we can visualize and amplify that. That is an opportunity we have to continue to create and to build the future."

In **Kaneko's** view, "There is a big difference between **design** management and **design** leadership. I'm not using **design** leadership as a title, because it's an earned position. You have to deliver it yourself. There is no shortcut other than to really be a good **designer**, so you have to keep investing in your own career. Find your own voice and leadership style."

"IF THERE WERE A SYNONYM OF '**DESIGN**' IT WOULD BE THE WORD '**FUTURE**.'"

7. HAVE NO FEAR

The future of **design** leadership is bright. "If there is any profession that owns the future, it's this one," **Dan Harden**, CEO of the **design** consultancy Whipsaw, says. "What other profession would be more about the future? If there were a synonym of '**design**' it would be the word '**future**.' We have never had a platform like this before. The audience is there, they are waiting for us to do great things. I'm super optimistic, drop all fear and go out and do it."

Or, as **Kaasgaard** puts it, "It's the greatest time to be a **designer**. Learn to talk the language of business and the language of technology, but let's not forget where we come from. Convergence is happening faster than we can imagine right now, and there is no better time to be a **designer**."

[Top Photo: Kelvin Murray/Getty Images]

//