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The Creative Promise of Design Thinking



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You're much more imaginative than you think, but your workplace — which needs your very best ideas — may be driving the creativity right out of you.

Big businesses can be the worst offenders, demanding a level of predictability and efficiency that is good for today's bottom line but bad for tomorrow's. The pressure to grow is relentless, but the battle is often uninspired.

I teach a different way of thinking that can spur inspiration and innovation even in the most traditional of workplaces. It's called design thinking, and it's simply a different approach to problem solving. Design thinking nurtures creativity, which is not as random as you think.

Design thinking dispels the "Moses Myth" — the belief that only a special person can part the seas and create. Design thinking arms even the most traditional thinker with ways to creatively blossom. Those arms include tools varying from visualisation — the use of imagery to see possible future conditions — to journey mapping, which is assessing things through the eyes of a customer.

My book *Solving Problems With Design Thinking: 10 Stories of What Works* includes details on the use of these tools. The field guide companion to the book — titled *Designing for Growth: A Design Thinking Tool Kit for Managers* — takes you step by step through the design thinking process.

Most managers are taught a linear problem-solving methodology: define the problem, identify various solutions, analyse each and choose the best one. Designers aren't nearly so impatient — or optimistic. They understand that successful invention takes experimentation and that empathy is hard-won.

Embracing design thinking means understanding that the customer is a real person with real problems, rather than a sales target. Instead of traditional market-research data, design thinkers dig for data that are user-driven and offer a deep understanding of a customer's unarticulated needs. Design thinking helps reframe questions in a way that expands the boundaries of the search itself.

Unearthing unarticulated needs must be done before solutions are even contemplated. Or as Steve Jobs famously put it: *"It's really hard to design products by focus groups. A lot of times, people don't know what they want until you show it to them."*

Design thinking requires taking a hard look at the present and drilling down to the essence of an issue to see what really matters. Researchers at Procter & Gamble were focused on improving detergents used to clean floors. That focus was limiting. Design thinking pointed them to a better answer — a better mop. So was born the best-selling Swiffer.

One of the keys to conjuring up a product like the Swiffer is brainstorming, though not the traditional kind. I call it structured brainstorming, which uses the data collected during the discovery phase as input, then converts the brainstorming output into something valuable — concepts of new possibilities. The kind of structured brainstorming approaches that designers use are far more productive than the free-form shout-out that we've all endured in the past. The ideas can be so plentiful that one firm I recently worked with generated more than 300, which they narrowed down to 23. Of these, only five eventually made it to marketplace testing.

Design thinking works to make marketplace testing practical by engaging customers in the act of building a new product. You need to create as vivid an experience as possible. You're engaging the customer to get at their needs. It's not a dress rehearsal.

In our own work at the Darden School of Business, we've seen first-hand how the design thinking approach has helped healthcare clinicians and staff open minds and find new solutions to long standing healthcare delivery challenges. Through projects as diverse as extended patient stays, hand hygiene and service delivery for patients seeking mental health services, the design thinking process clarified the need for new ways of thinking that began with a better understanding of the individuals involved.

Unlike traditional marketplace thinking, design thinking expects to get it wrong. You experiment and figure out why it works or not. The goal is to fail early to succeed sooner. Actively look for data that proves the product won't work. It's valuable information for saving money and zeroing in on how to make products that do work.

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Biography

Professor Jeanne M. Liedtka teaches Business Administration at the Darden School of the University of Virginia. Liedtka is an expert on the hot topic of design thinking and how it can be used to fuel innovation and organic growth.

Liedtka's most recent books are *The Catalyst: How You Can Lead Extraordinary Growth*, *Designing for Growth: A Design Thinking Tool Kit for Managers*, *The Physics of Business Growth* and *Solving Business Problems With Design: 10 Stories of What Works*.

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