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How to Tackle a Problem with Business Design Thinking
by Parker Lee
Advisory Article

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Every day, we all have challenges, opportunities and initiatives to tackle. I've found it best to approach and manage this work using several Business Design Thinking tools.

Before offering a few examples of these tools, let me explain what I mean by Business Design Thinking. Business Design Thinking is an alternative approach for how a business runs compared to a traditional top-down, silo-like organization that plans and operates with linear processes.

Setting context

The first step to tackling a problem is setting context. Apply the proverbial, "Know Thyself" axiom before trying to solve your problem. By building a framework for your challenge, you will get yourself off to a good start. Clarity on the task to be done is important for excellence in execution, as well as in gaining alignment and participation in the design of your problem's solution. Gather your associates and work through the important elements of the initiative.

Another great technique is developing a problem brief. This should be done with a group of all the affected stakeholders. Use a workshop session with your stakeholders to complete your brief. I suggest it is printed out as a large wall canvas, then have each participant put ideas on one sticky note and post it in each brief category. Perform an alignment activity to discuss and vote on the agreed upon response.

Key components of your brief should be:

- **Goal**: Start with the end in mind and work backwards. What is your goal? On what issues is it determined? Write your goal as a question, i.e., "How might we double our customer base with a completely different service in three years?"

- **Why**: Why do you want or need to address this problem? What is the specific problem you are solving? What is your strategic intent?

- **Available Resources:** Do you have a project budget? Assistance from Human Resources? Who is your team size? Do you have access to outside resources such as consultants, contractors or agencies? What technology is available?

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- **Parameters & Timing**: Are parameters already established? Are you required to stay within certain boundaries? What is your timing? Do you have to demonstrate a solution within one year? Three months? Five weeks?

- **Responsibilities:** What is the decision process? Who is involved and what are their roles (e.g., input, recommend, fund, approve, influence, perform)

- **Sponsors:** Who are your formal and informal sponsors? The division head? Key leaders? The president of the company?

- **Measure:** How will you know you are succeeding? What are your measures, how are they taken and how often?

Example of a Problem Brief Canvas

Problem Brief Canvas

Problem Brief Canvas	
Goal. Start with the end in mind and work backwards. What is your goal? Is it determined based on earnings, revenue, profit, market share or to be #1 in the industry? Write your goal as a question, i.e., how might we double our customer base with a completely different service in 3 years?	**Parameters and Timine.** Are parameters already established? Are you required to stay within your current industry? Do you have to demonstrate revenue and / or profit within one year? Three years? Five years? Show any key milestones.
Why? Why do you want or need to significantly grow business or start a new business? What problem are you solving? What is your strategic intent? Diversification, expansion, to build a broader network. Describe the benefits and risks.	**Responsibilities.** What is the decision process? Who is involved and what are their roles (e.g., input, recommend, fund, approve, perform)
Available Resources. Do you have any seed funds? What human resources do you have? What is your team size? Do you have access to outside resources? What technology is available?	**Sponsors.** Who are your formal and informal sponsors? The Board? Key leaders. A division of the company?
Measure. How will you know you are succeeding? What are your measures, how are they taken and how often?	

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Diverse council of problem-solvers

Gaining awareness and momentum throughout your organization is often crucial to ensuring successful project implementation. To do so, form a coalition of employees to guide the design and implementation of the solution. Your "council of solutioners" will oversee the entire process to make sure it stays on track and serve as the on-going guiding body.

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We've found seven or eight members works best, although many organizations have more. The key is to have a mix of management and staff, and a diverse set of skills and ways of thinking. When people with their different points of view and experiences converge, they create the types of creativity that individuals could not have done or found alone. While any individual can ideate and create new things, leveraging diverse thoughts and gaining input from different perspectives can solve the most complex problems.

According to a recent study by Deloitte, cultivating "diversity of thought" can boost innovation and creative problem-solving. Why? People bring different cultures, backgrounds, and personalities to the table — and those differences inform how they think. Some people are analytical, while others thrive in creative zones. Some are detailed planners, and others love impulsiveness. Mingling up the types of thinkers in addressing problems and sparking solutions can kindle creativity, insight, and improve efficiency. Varying the types of thinkers in a company guards against "groupthink," a common issue in groups where they focus first and foremost on group conformity, often at the expense of making good decisions.

Work in 'Discover-Craft-Build' iterative cycles

Think cyclically – not linearly. Build processes for the problem-solving methods that follow an iterative cycle to discover, collect and analyze data and insights. Next, craft and observe interactions from the prototypes of solution options. Lastly, develop action plans, build your solution and use feedback methods iterate and improve.

There are several benefits of applying the process of iterative cycling:

- In your 'Discover' phase, gathering initial requirements and plans are faster; you can quickly create premises and assumptions to meet the needs of the target audience. In the 'Craft' phase, develop a prototype to test and gather feedback to quickly gather the key value to your audience.

- Each period of review in your iterative cycle allows you to re-assess the key value to be gained by your user, by determining which changes matter and which ones do not deliver value to the user.

- Rapid iteritive cycles allow you to react to company, market or environmental changes. Longer and more resource-heavy methods move more slowly and are less nimble.

All of these factors have been shown to reduce time and costs for problem-solving efforts.

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Get feedback - Don't take my word for it!

A key aspect of innovative problem-solving is to gather feedback and input to your ideas, concepts and decisions. It is important to get input from a robust set of opinions that represent your target audience. Below are a few methods you can use to obtain feedback.

Develop an Interview Guide

Create a set of questions that get to the heart of the problem. Do not seek out opinion solutions at this point. Your primary objective is to identify the essence of the problem from the affected audience's point of view.

As a rule of thumb, start off with a few easy identifying questions (i.e.name, job), then ask some broader open-ended questions that are a bit more unexpected. For example, ask whether the person sees a problem, then move on to "What if" questions about the broader reasons for the issue within the organization. Continue to dig deeper on the specific problem and use "What if" questions around its desired outcomes.

Feedback Methods

Individual interview

Meet the participant at a location of their choosing, but not within a group of people. Bring along a second note taker (visual or copy), so you can compare notes and images.

Group interviews

Group interviews are especially useful to get context around a population of affected stakeholders and gain insights into their issues and group dynamics. Be sure to apply techniques that ensure that the opinions of quieter members are heard.

Community opinion

Tap into a network of stakeholders or folks within your identified audience who are interested in finding solutions. Sometimes this can be an actual "innovation" network of people, institutions and companies that are outside the firm — they can also be inside the firm. Larry Huston of 4INNO, describes an innovation network as "intellectual assets that companies can link up with to solve problems and find ideas, while beginning to think about those assets as an extended part of their organization — and therefore quickly create top-line growth and bring new things to the marketplace."

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Expert interviews

Experts can be called upon to give technical and detailed information. This is very valuable when you have a time-crunch or the opportunity involves some kind of technical or historical knowledge.

Get outside!

Seek inspiration in new places. Look at the set of experiences, needs and behaviors associated with your problem. Consider where else and when these set of conditions occur and go observe that situation. You might gain a completely new perspective and gain an invaluable insight.

About the Author

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Parker Lee is president of Compass52 and has been actively designing organizations for better performance and empowering change since the 1970s. Previously, he was president and executive vice president of business development at XPLANE, which, under his leadership, enjoyed significant annual growth while delivering innovative design thinking engagements for clients globally. During the "dot com" era, Parker acted as vice president of business development for four pre-IPO technology companies. Parker also pioneered the use of social media for use in communications for the California State Democratic Party during the 2004 election. Lee is a graduate of UC Davis in Organizational Development.

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