

Design the Conversation

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INTRODUCTION

Design the Conversation is a website designed to synthesize the latest research on conversation, design, and the under explored area of shaping conversation in our workplaces; a place where together we can explore what new and exciting ways design processes and methods could further benefit our world. From the onset, I wanted this site to be a place that strengthens the design community, by encouraging each designer to challenge what they know about their niche of design and feel a sense of bravery about expanding their role in business, tackling tough (and sometimes uncomfortable!) topics and supporting interdisciplinary groups as an equally contributing member.

Like many graduate students, arriving at this particular version of my thesis has been a long, arduous journey. While I had always wanted this research to pull from various disciplines of study: linguistics, psychology, anthropology, cybernetics, business (to name a few), the process of making this research cohesive and digestible, encouraging (vs overwhelming), and relatable to designers has been the most difficult, but most rewarding part of this journey. I hope my efforts aid in shining light on the opportunities designers have.

The changing study of form

“...new, expanded forms of design practice do not abandon the traditional concerns of form-giving and making that have defined design in the past. It is the concept of form that has grown more supple and complex...” (Buchanan, “Introduction: Design and Organizational Change” 9)

Over the last twenty years, designers have been applying their unique mix of hard and soft skills to push the boundaries of where they study and apply form to their work. Essentially, this means the way designers shape “things” have gone beyond communication (design using signs, symbols and images) and construction (design of artifacts/products) to tackle new, complex issues that require an understanding of the human experience -- how people relate to people -- as well as the larger system of themes that emerge within the collective human experience. These new applications of design are what educator and speaker Richard Buchanan calls third and fourth order: “Instead of focusing on symbols and things, designers have turned to two quite different places to create new products and to reflect on the value of design in our lives. They have turned to *action* and *environment*” (Buchanan, “Design Research” 10-11).

	Symbols	Things	Action	Thought
Symbols	Graphic Design			
Things		Industrial Design		
Action			Interaction Design	
Thought				Environmental Design

Buchanan's 4 orders of design

Designers working in “action” (third order) spaces often study services, experiences, interfaces and information; they are primarily focused on relationships between humans and the objects that support their interactions. Their work may not always directly result in a tangible artifact or new service. Designers working in “thought” (fourth order) spaces are often taking holistic perspectives, seeking to understand the core values or ideas that hold systems together. Their work is focused on the intangible, and they are most often found in organizations that have implemented a design focus at the core of their operations.

Yet, for all the documented success of the new roles designers have played outside of communication and product development, many businesses are either unaware or resistant to this shift: “What our research demonstrates, however, is that many companies have been slow to catch up... over 50 percent admitted that they have no objective way to assess or set targets for the output of their design teams. With no clear way to link design to business health, senior leaders are often reluctant to divert scarce resources to design functions” (Sheppard, et al.). Designers searching to apply their design skills in a more expansive way across the organization have often found a severe lack of opportunity, both internally in the form of “moving up” as well as externally, through job boards.

In addition to the lack of job opportunities, many designers practicing first and second order design are simply unaware they could apply their unique mix of skills in broader contexts. Despite interacting with a mixed bag of design specialties during their education, designers often enter a workforce segregated by

specific specialties in design, such as UX Design, Graphic/Visual Design, or Instructional Design. These groups target specific skillsets and interests, and while niche design work will always remain vital, segregation misses an opportunity to discuss relevant, broader applications of design research and themes, to challenge individual perspectives and open up career possibilities.

It is with appreciation of these newer, more abstract and intangible areas of design that I have synthesized the latest research across various disciplines related to conversation, such as human needs in conversation, types of conversation and conversational offenders in our workplaces, with traditional design tools, methods and processes, to imagine how designers could effectively apply well honed skills in exciting ways that may push the boundaries of our work and offer new opportunities for designers in the workplace.

No one type of design

It is my belief that design itself is fluid - what is significant about the art and practice of design is what we share: the iterative processes, overlapping tools and methodologies, an inquisitive nature, how we frame challenges, among others. Some of us are stronger in one area over another; we each have specific and unique educational backgrounds and experiences, diverse capabilities with technology and software, different abilities to sketch, etc.

It is in appreciation of the blending and overlapping in the practice of design, that I chose not to focus on any one specific type of design or designer in my research. The purpose was to be inclusive, to say: "Anyone can do this!" as well as to avoid getting into any ideology over semantics.

I use the term "designer" without anchoring it to graphic design, industrial design, packaging design, as a few examples, to connect with a broad range of designers and design work. I reference "design thinking" without weighing in on whether any particular family of thought (IDEO, Stanford d.school, as a few examples) is the "right" one. I approach design thinking as a mindset, not a framework.

Ultimately what is imperative is that we elevate design - that there are a wide range of opportunities for us to take any special mix of talents and apply them in ways that excite us as designers, that better our communities, that aid in tackling our world's most crucial challenges, and that bring together our cohorts across the discipline-divide in purposeful work.

RATIONALE

“A design approach as an integral part of the business strategy enables enterprises to systematically create value propositions for the people they address. It allows us to integrate stakeholder-specific approaches in an overarching vision, and to design artifacts and systems that are useful and meaningful for everyone in touch with the enterprise. It fosters relationships by exploring, meeting, and exceeding real human needs and turning them into business initiatives, products, and services” (Guenther 21).

Many of our businesses are at a critical crossroads: we have recognized the limitations of traditional, bureaucratic, hierarchical top-down styles of operations.... And we have recognized the benefits of agile, nimble, human-centered styles of operations. But appreciation for a design approach hasn't always meant wider adoption.

Why?

It's a complicated road - there is no 'one right way' there.

Figuring out the right approach for your organization will need to consider a multitude of factors at the center of feasibility, viability, and meaningfulness.

It can be costly.

Integrating new software, hiring new people, training - these costs can add up to be a significant investment.

It doesn't happen overnight.

As the Forbes.com article “Don't Think AARP is Synonymous With Innovation? You Don't Know AARP” suggests, instilling a new mindset across an organization may take years to accomplish.

It requires buy-in from risk-averse stakeholders.

When applying creative processes to strategy development, those more comfortable with “tried and true” business methods may be skeptical of newer, participatory styles of leadership.

It is difficult to measure success.

Sometimes a design-led approach results in indirect benefits, which can be difficult to track and measure on a balance sheet.

It would be impossible to address all of these concerns on one site, especially when doing so might require an intricate understanding of a particular organization. But I can advocate for one facet that supports efforts across all 5 of these areas: conversation.

The power of focused, purposeful conversation can help organizations discuss a myriad of paths

forward, aiding groups in finding alignment, ensuring confusion doesn't result in unnecessary costs, and it can inform people about the complex topics related to transformation. At its best, conversation can help turn assumptions into understanding, the cynical into the empathic.

But good conversations don't just happen (or rarely do). Just like any great product, they are the result of much planning and consideration, and require a good captain at the helm. Designers, I believe, are up for the challenge of the captain role. The tools and methods employed by designers over the last twenty years have prepared them to tackle the abstract nature of designing conversation.

Poor conversation is a waste of a valuable resource: time

"Most companies have elaborate procedures for managing capital. They require a compelling business case for any new investment. They set hurdle rates. They delegate authority carefully, prescribing spending limits for each level. An organization's time, in contrast, goes largely unmanaged" (Mankins et al).

How is our time spent at work? Often, it is in "phone calls, e-mails, instant messages, meetings, and teleconferences," which causes "organizations to become bloated, bureaucratic, and slow" (Mankins et al.).

Here are a few stats to illustrate the magnitude of the costs associated with poor conversations in our organizations:

- A 2016 Harvard Business Review article notes how one study showed the cost of "a single weekly meeting of mid-level managers was costing one organization \$15M a year" ("Estimate the Cost of a Meeting with This Calculator").
- In Doodle's 2019 State of Meetings report, US companies wasted over \$399 billion as a result of poorly organized meetings, which resulted in a number of undesirable outcomes: stealing necessary time away from the rest of the respondent's workload, causing confusion around actions and loss of focus on projects, slowing progress, and alienating clients ("State of Meetings Report").
- A study done by Microsoft, American Online and Salary.com determined workers only actually worked a total of three days. The other 2 days were considered time wasted. *Pointless meetings* was listed at the top of reasons why (Belkin).

Also striking - about one third of Americans believed that these poorly organized (or canceled) meetings were what posed the biggest threat to their company ("State of Meetings Report"). In a simple Google search you can find countless popular articles written about meetings, such as "Stop the Meeting Madness" (Perlow et al.) and "Crushing morale, killing productivity - why do offices put up with meetings?" (Jenkins), illustrating a pervasive frustration we are not addressing across business.

Taken from a more holistic vantage point, this prevalent waste means that our biggest opportunities to converse about strategy, to debate, to clarify, to align, to forecast, to collaborate, prioritize, understand, to frame problems, to form connections... are often considered unstructured, and lack purpose and direction. The cost has been tremendous, impacting the economy's bottom line into the billions, and wreaking havoc on morale.

It means that there are so many missed opportunities for organizations to engage stakeholders around a shared mission, to satisfy the human desire to have value and purpose in their work, to feel a sense of belonging, to create a corporate identity that positively reflects the millions of tiny touch-points that happen each day within an organization's literal and figurative walls.

And what about time for *reflection*? As John Dewey famously said "We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience" (Dewey 78). Various studies agree; the research from one indicates how workers who were given time to reflect outperformed a group who had not: "On average, the reflection group increased its performance on the final training test by 22.8 percent than did the control group" - even though the control group worked longer (Nobel). Thus, it is arguably just as important for organizations to give time and purpose to conversations with the self, just as time as given to conversations with teams and managers.

I believe the art of conversation design can take back the reins, give workers their valuable time back, save organizations money, improve the experiences around daily communicating and collaborating... among so many other benefits more fully explored throughout my thesis site, *DesigntheConversation.org*.

We need designers designing conversation

Design the Conversation is not about telling people what to say, how to say it or when to say it; it is about laying the groundwork for understanding - what human beings need to feel satisfied in conversation, what tools and methods designers have mastered over the last twenty years that could be beneficial to planning purposeful conversations, so we can better engage and align groups who have come together for discussions around concepts both big and small.

But first, you have to start by understanding what is meaningful to people when they converse, what boxes — once checked — allow people to actively listen and empathize, what factors — like time and team leadership — play havoc on our ability to communicate effectively, and how our own internal dialogue — like fear of failure — can play out in group dynamics.

Design the Conversation is research that recognizes that while conversation is an act, it is ultimately the experience of a conversation one walks away remembering.

So... how can designers make it a good one?

PROJECT

I'm fascinated by how a process like conversation, that is such an integrated and considerable part of every person's day is largely ignored in today's workplaces, rather than seen as a vastly untapped opportunity. But as words like culture, mindset, and engagement become more important to today's leaders, I believe taking a hard look at our organizations' conversations is a portal to understanding our coworkers and our corporate identity better, to achieve alignment around strategic initiatives and company mission, to aid in tackling silos or a corrupted culture dynamic, as well as to reduce the massive costs and emotional toll conversational bloat takes on how individuals rate their value or success within their company's established paradigm, regardless of whether it is perceived or real.

Ultimately, this project is the synthesis of research across many disciplines, where the art of *satisficing* — a term designers need to be more familiar with — can showcase how designers need not experiment and learn, iterate and develop with the rigor of a scientist.

As Don Norman writes:

Designers are interested in major change, in major effects. Designers do not need to know the exact optimum setting of parameters: they need to satisfice, not optimize. These two principles: big effects and satisficing mean that design can use faster tests with less experimental care, with less attention to small biases and with less precision and rigor. Designers are only interested in big effects, not the tiny ones studied by the scientist. Our methods do not have to be perfect; they have to be good enough. Design needs experimental methods that are appropriate for the practical world (Norman "Design Education").

With this research, I hope to shed light to an opportunity to further develop the impact design can have across business, but also to showcase how a designer can pull from a mixture of disciplines, and synthesize data in a way that can be "good enough" to teach, to empower, to encourage, to challenge the status quo, of the practical world we live in. Thus my first deliverable is the research I have performed across psychology, sociology, linguistics, anthropology, cybernetics, and design (among others), and the connections I've made between conversation and conversational needs to the tools, methods and processes designers can use to make conversation more thoughtful, strategic and focused. I truly believe that better conversation could make our time feel more valued, while saving organizations from bloat and waste. (See Appendix II for full text.)

For my second deliverable, inspired by the anti-disciplinary movement, I created a website that would house the written content, providing free and open access to anyone interested in the subject of conversation design, rather than focus solely on submission to a peer reviewed journal, where valuable information may never be discovered. I believe the topic of designing conversation will become more popular over the next five years, and with it my site will become a place that designers can come to build knowledge and understanding, without requiring access to any database - further accomplishing my goal that this research feel approachable with an "anyone can do this!" appeal. (Screenshots of the website can be found in Appendix II.)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

At the onset of my research, these questions helped guide my studies:

- Which disciplines are performing current research on topics related to conversation, both inside and out of organizational contexts?
- Are designers already designing conversations? What will I bring that is new to this space?
- How can we take a holistic approach to the topic of designing conversation? (How can conversation design be elevated past single, project specific, work?)
- How can I synthesize this research as a guidebook and resource without it becoming a “how-to”?

DEFINING AUDIENCE

Type of research

In his 1999 speech “Design and the New Learning,” Richard Buchanan implored that design research be expanded to tackle research beyond the clinical level, writing about it: “gathering data and assembling facts is only a small part of the challenge of research to advance the understanding of design” (“Design Research 19). He encouraged two types of research be sought by institutions: *Applied* research, “which seeks to establish connections among many individual cases,” and *basic* research, which “seeks to establish which are the significant facts and connections in our experience of design” (“Design Research” 19). I believe my thesis falls somewhere between applied and basic studies as I try to elevate conversation design beyond just “how-to” apply to any single project, any single type of design practice, or any single opportunity to measure and track it.

Audience

My writing is focused on being approachable and down to earth - my intention was for it to feel “doable” for a single, lone, designer, or a whole team of experienced designers, all seeking to broaden their impact within their organization. My audience is first and foremost designers who are interested in how deeper design can impact their position, make their work more meaningful and valuable to their organization, and as a way designers can feel emboldened to tackle new areas of work at the intersection of other disciplines.

A secondary audience may be to the academic community, allowing institutions to see the overarching story of modern design work. This could influence the development of academic programs and course

offerings, especially in the traditional design school framework, as evidence of the type of work designers are tackling in practice as they seek to answer how best to educate the next generation of designers as well as fund design research.

I believe this thesis may be of interest to design ‘think-tanks’ such as AIGA, or IDEO, who are always interested in the current pulse of design research. I think some of the research could trickle down to impact local organizations and meetup group conversation as designers discuss future opportunities.

And finally, I believe this research would be of interest, in an encapsulated version, in design-focused journals such as *Design Issues*.

PROCESS

The main methodology I followed for my research was similar to that of most design thinking frameworks: Discover, Define, Develop and Deliver. Within each stage, there were phases of divergent and convergent thinking and doing - followed by periods of reflection. This allowed time for new considerations to unfold and connections to be made between ideas and concepts within the various disciplines of research.

Discovery Phase

This phase started long before I knew what specific topic I wanted to delve into for my thesis: 2017. Together with Thomas O’Donnell, then the program director of University of Baltimore’s MA Communication Design program, an Independent Study we called “Hybrid Thinking” was developed. The term *Hybrid Thinking* was inspired from an article in FastCompany.com called “Forget Design Thinking and try Hybrid Thinking” which defined it as “the conscious blending of different fields of thought to discover and develop opportunities that were previously unseen by the status quo” (Patnaik). As a former accountant, this topic was especially interesting to me as I tried to figure out how I was going to marry previous career paths with my design education. During this course I first encountered the previously referenced “4 Orders of Design” popularized by Richard Buchanan and, needless to say, I was hooked. The following summer, I applied and was accepted as AARP’s Enterprise Strategy Social Impact Agenda intern for a 12 week, summer-long practicum.

During this time, I was on the front lines of a strategic transformation – watching a large, bureaucratic, and traditional “top-down” organization attempt to shift into a design centric, nimble and innovative one. The

struggle was real; many people had been there over twenty years, which was both a blessing and a curse. Culture was ingrained; identity molded. The Enterprise Strategy team was the [relatively] new man on the block, and was still in the midst of defining and establishing itself – it was tasked with the difficult duty of influencing the mindset, goals and activities of those they ultimately had no formal authority over.

I was the only designer that had applied; most (if not all) of the other applicants were MBA students. To me this reflected a larger shift in the business world's perspective (as well as a testament to the open-mindedness of AARP) and a sure sign that organizations were interested in approaching the “same old problems” with new, outside the box approaches, by integrating creative processes to solve dilemmas that addressed the human dynamics at the root of becoming and being innovative. As a designer, I felt like I provided numerous ways to help them tell better, more persuasive stories for influence, better visuals for buy-in, and I saw first hand how a designer working outside traditional department roles could really aid organizations.

Ultimately, it came time to pick a thesis topic. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my thesis was forced to shift around to adapt to the restrictions at the time. My initial concept was to test conversation design on real working user groups and reflect on the experience, however, as workers transitioned to virtual spaces, those who had been initially excited to participate became hesitant due to the added stressors of working home life. I knew a shift would be needed to accommodate this reality and after much discussions with my thesis group and committee, I decided to create a website that would house the extended amount of synthesized research, which would allow people to directly interact with the information and concept of conversation design.

For full Literature Review of the discovery phase, please see Appendix I.

Define Phase

This phase was really about drilling down and focusing on what I wanted to include in the project and how it would best be “delivered”. Once a website was decided, I returned to all the books and articles I'd read since 2017 and reviewed each, selecting topics and concepts to include.



early concepts mapping, August 2020



"journey" mapping, November 2020

You can see from the left photo, which showcases randomly placed, loosely thought "ideas", that concepts such as "interdisciplinary," and "human needs in conversation," and "tangible vs abstract" were there from a very early stage. From the right photo, you can see sections, identified by color had taken shape (now taped because I'd moved them so many times the post-it no longer stuck!) and the path through the material had been flushed out, as well as individual posts had been identified. The scope of the project had now clearly taken shape, and I was ready to begin writing and developing the site to hold it all.

Develop Phase

Now it was time to write each section and the next few months were spent writing the material for the site, developing the style (brand) of my site, creating wireframes, building the site, hiring a wordpress guru for support, hiring a editor to review the written material, and then finally adding content to the site and polishing it extensively. Wireframes will be shared in the next section on branding.

WRITING

My writing process was iterative, meaning I went through many versions of outlining, revising, adding content, reading aloud, and sharing the material before it was sent to an editor for final proofing and then added to the website.

On the wall above my computer, I had one word printed on a page: *Satisfice*. This term, inspired by famous designer Don Norman, is a combination of "satisfy" and "suffice" which always reminded me that my

goal was to bring a satisfactory level of understanding to this new topic -that research as a designer must reflect the practical world we live in. To be practical, my writing always needed to be approachable, down to earth, and encouraging.

Each “post” got their own document, organized by section on Google Drive. Thus my original “tangible vs abstract” post it note became “designers toolkit and methods” post it, which finally became a post titled “Tools of the Trade” on the site. I also entered all the sections and titles onto a spreadsheet so they could be tracked as I wrote each one and easily shared with my committee if needed. This spreadsheet was updated constantly as each section and post was revised so that it would reflect its current stage of production.

BRANDING

Identity / Typefaces

All of my visual choices for the site reflected this continued commitment to practical and approachable. For headlines and identity the font family of Baloo Tamma 2 was chosen. This had the right personality for the site as well as the practicalness of being an accessible Google Font, so it could streamline with the website easily. Google Fonts describes the font as one with “bounce,” but only “slightly” while being “carefree yet confident, sprightly yet versatile”. It felt like it could be describing conversation itself.

For body copy and smaller headlines, the highly legible Open Sans was chosen. This font is also in the Google Font library so it would streamline with the site. Described as a humanist font with a “neutral, yet friendly appearance” I felt like this more serious font would blend nicely with Baloo Tamma, while still maintaining the approachableness I was seeking in bringing the content to life.



final identity for DesigntheConversation.org

Baloo Tamma 2

Baloo Tamma 2

Baloo Tamma 2

Baloo Tamma 2

Open Sans

Open Sans

Open Sans

Open Sans

In keeping with my desire to keep the site visually approachable to reflect the content, I chose a vibrant and lively color palette. These colors are also carried through in all the graphics.

Colors	Name	Hex Values
	white, black	ffffff, 000000
	bright blue	#1197bc
	brick red	#7d2617
	orange	#f3723f
	yellow	#fed11f
	beige	#f6edd0

Look, Tone & Feel

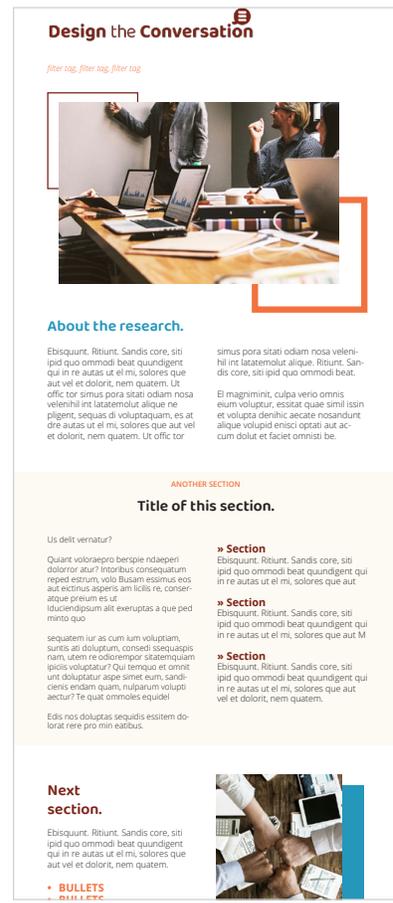
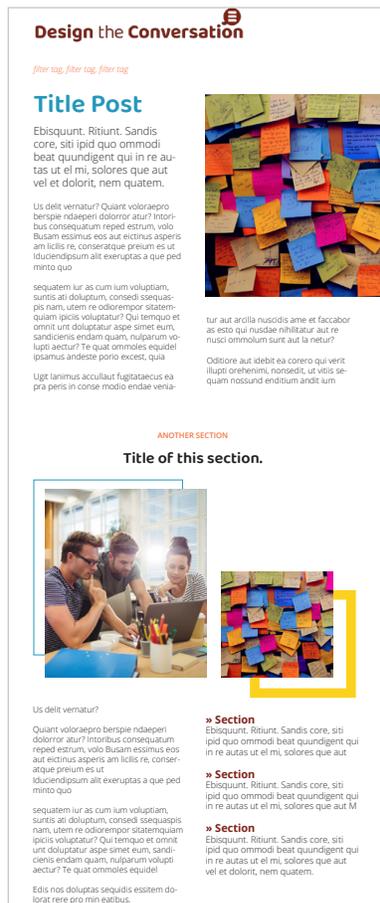
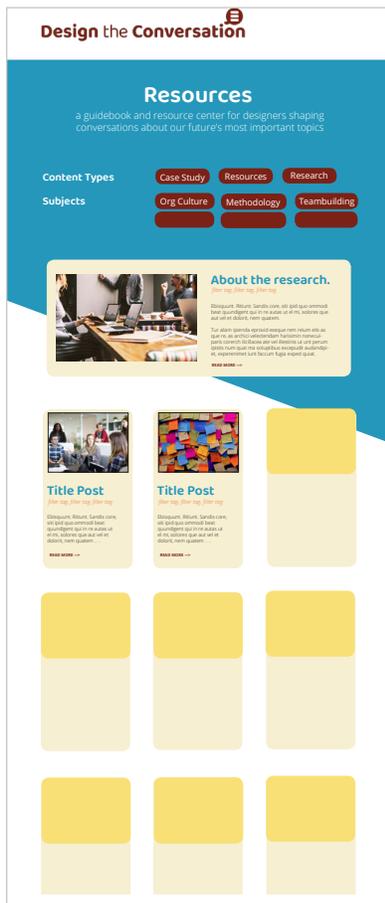
My original style guide described the goal of the website's look, tone and feel as this: "Overall the site will focus on simple layouts, graphics, and hierarchy, featuring a blog-style landing page. Photographs will be of real people in workplace environments, supported by visuals of commonly seen designer tools and activities. 'Cheesy' stock photos will be avoided and vector graphics will be limited - the site needs to feel authentic and relatable, viewers need to connect to they think 'I can do this too!'. Photos will be warm and approachable and will include a mix of genders, races, etc. Tone of copy text will be informal and relaxed and as close to "conversational" as it can be to support the images and message".

I feel I have achieved this on my site. Below are a few of the photographs and images from the site that continue to support the look and feel I've established.

Photographs and Graphics



Website Development



originally submitted wireframes for site

Though some changes have been made to these original concepts, I believe the website as it has been developed and designed remains true to my original wireframing. Through iterative processes of design and revise, as well as discussion with committee and fellow design students, the inclusion of more vector graphics was made to reflect the subject matter, with more ability to be adaptable for better representation of gender, race and age.

For screen shots of the website, see Appendix II.

LIMITATIONS

The research and subsequent website is **not**:

A field guide.

My intention is not to show a how-to field guide, as design (and conversation design) expansive nature makes it difficult to capture all the nuances and intricacies of each situation.

All encompassing.

Due to the nature of the subject matter, and the desire to lay down the essentials without being overwhelming, I have not included every facet of conversation, design, and conversation design.

The solution to everything.

It is not my intention to convey that conversation alone can solve all of our problems - only that it is an overlooked area with much potential to explore. The purpose of this research and website is to showcase the potential, synthesize research across the disciplines, and encourage us to be brave!

PROMOTION OF WORK

The best way to present human-to-human design research will be through inperson interactions and engagements in the future, when the world returns to gathering post COVID-19.

Current

Plans to market *Design the Conversation* will start with the participation in the Service Design Network's virtual "Do Good - Give Back" Campaign. This effort is calling upon practitioners, students, agencies and academics to share their work in any way that could benefit others through the hashtag #SDDay21 and #ServiceDesignDay on June 1.

It has always been a dream of mine to submit a paper to MIT Press's *Design Issues*. Once I have defended this project and graduated, I am planning to condense and submit my research for review.

Future

On the national level, one of the conferences I plan to submit my research for at a later date, when in-person events have returned, is the AIGA Design and Business Conference.

At a local level, I would also like to submit my research for a discussion as part of a AIGA Baltimore Community Meeting. At this time, there is no upcoming event planned, but I will revisit the site to ensure I am aware of the next scheduled meeting.

On a micro level, I would like to work with Megan Rhee, program director of University of Baltimore's

MFA Integrated Design, to develop a small project that I believe could fit in with the current University of Baltimore's "Design Thinking" course, which I will discuss further in the next section under *Next Steps*.

CONCLUSION

We've reached new opportunities for design and designers today, but with this comes new responsibilities and a new awareness of how design can impact the world in a negative way. Wicked problems are here to stay; they question our very future and ask us to adapt in ways we are not accustomed to. Designers trained in understanding the nuances of the way we communicate can help mediate through this uncertainty, supporting groups who need to speak more directly with each other, creating open and safe environments for the best, most novel and feasible ideas to crawl up to the surface.

This cannot happen in a bubble. As Milan Guenther writes in *Intersection*: "In every project or program we are involved in, we find elements that don't fit together, and conditions that prevent good relationships from developing. When relationships fail, it is rarely a single issue that can be blamed. It is the interplay of all the parts which, together with the circumstances at hand, lead to a complex picture of problems and shortcomings" (448). This means that designing better, more thoughtful, more purposeful conversation may be extremely valuable to a single team or single product development initiative, but unless we want it to have real impact, real value to business and our communities at large, we need to start thinking BIGGER. We need to go beyond a focus on human-to-human interactions, to how formed communities of humans interact. We need to look at systems of humans, communities, and nations, factoring in all the social, biological, and technological influences.

Next Steps

I truly believe this research could aid designers across all of design's niches. In addition to the desire to submit to conferences once in-person events begin again (as discussed previously under *Promotion of Work*), I would love to do the following:

Short term:

Research to develop the right social media platform, where topics related to conversation design could be further explored. This could look like interviews with influential designers, tips and tricks to experiment with conversation as well as ways to measure conversation successes.

Long term:

Further develop the website to include more “chat challenges” as well as get feedback from designers who have interacted with the site to find opportunities to make the site more interactive.

Develop a small project that could fit into one of UB’s current courses, such as PBDS 719 Design Thinking, a graduate level course. I believe the “Conversation Mapping” exercise from my site, on the page “Design for Common Ground” (see Appendix II) would be a fun and applicable way to introduce students to the importance of conversation in their work.

Final thoughts

Though the role of “conversation designer” may never become the norm, my hope is that more organizations come to appreciate the value of designers placed throughout the ranks, outside of the traditional roles, where there is an ever increasing need for connection - between each other as well as to the best, most novel ideas. We have to start considering conversation deeper than its messy variables. What are the patterns, what are the static elements we can plan for? This thesis has attempted to nail down as many of those elements as possible by examining what things we *can* shape about our future conversations can give us power over them.

Designers can use many of the tools and methods we’ve been using over the last twenty years to make the experience of conversing more focused and strategic, if given the opportunity. But designers also need to showcase the benefits of this work, we need to have the right measurements and expectations: What is the return on investment, the value? We will need to be able to communicate this.

Design the Conversation believes our workplace conversations can and should go beyond the basics. Communicating with our teams, our managers, or between our leadership should make us feel valued, and purposeful. Designers can help, by using established tools like mapping, interviewing, storytelling, and facilitation to plan for and shape better conversations. This means we, as designers, need to be open to changing what we define as a “product” – that it may no longer be tangible and concrete, it may be shaping the intangible, such as conversation.

My research, written content, and subsequent website has covered these topics by giving designers a great place to start challenging themselves, their roles, and their organizations, so that they may go forth and ... *design the conversation.*

appendix I

LITERATURE REVIEW

1960s to 1990s

But first, brief recap

In the 1960s and into the 1970s, the term design science was created and then developed more fully by R. Buckminster Fuller, S. A. Gregory, and Herbert Simon, an architect, engineer and cognitive psychologist respectively. By the 1980s, researchers Nigel Cross and Bryan Lawson began testing groups of scientists and groups of architectural designers to compare the unique processes and outcomes obtained to the same problem (Dam and Siang). This was the first conclusive suggestion that perspectives and processes outside of scientific methods might also aid in problem solving.

Co-design and participatory design methods were gaining popularity in Europe, especially in Scandinavia, as projects such as UTOPIA showcased the successful ways end-users could be included in social design processes (Lundin). In the late 1980s and early 1990s the personal computer moved in: "The mass-adoption of home computers is a technological advancement comparable to the invention of the printing press, ushering in a new age for mass communication and granting access to esoteric art styles and digital software for new methods of creating art" (Ellis). Suddenly, anyone could be a designer. As internet access broadened, so did the connectedness between the profession. Shocking new visuals, like MTV's logo, were redefining and elevating the role (and voice) visual designers, as one example, had in branding and advertising (Ellis). Influenced by participatory design methods, user-centred design reflected the increasing role computers had in our everyday lives, especially in work contexts (Pacheco). Additionally, new tools, such as prototyping, were gaining popularity - allowing designers to "quickly test, iterate and ensure the usability of designs before fully investing in the development of a product" (Pacheco). Embracing (quick) failure as part of an iterative process became an essential mindset for designers.

In the early 1990s, the IDEO agency was born out of the growing need for a formal design thinking framework. A segment on Nightline showcasing an IDEO team as they reimagined the shopping cart illustrated just how popular and unusual their methods were at the time ("ABC Nightline - IDEO Shopping Cart").

Also, in the early 1990s, design theorist and educator Richard Buchanan connected the dots between

design thinking and wicked problems in a speech and subsequent article in MIT Press titled "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking." Though he wasn't the first to use 'wicked problems' - a phrase first coined by Horst Rittel in the 1960s to describe a complex, multi-layered set of circumstances that have no direct or obvious solution - Buchanan was the first to really link design processes and their ability to support cross disciplinary discovery to create solutions for complex societal phenomena.

He writes: "the sciences developed over time from the Renaissance and formalised in the specialisations and processes they used, becoming more and more cut off from each other... that design thinking has formed as a means of integrating these highly specialised fields of knowledge, so that they can be jointly applied to the new problems we are faced with from a holistic perspective" (Dam and Siang). This desire to understand users and problems in a more holistic fashion led to a transition to broader focus on user experience, or experience design, by the mid 1990s (Pacheco).

Designers were questioning their role in superficial consumer driven work - they were tired of "posters and toasters" and wanted deeper, more meaningful work.

The scene was ripe for change as the 1990s came to a close, as both design researchers and designers were seeking deeper ways to explore and apply design for their own job satisfaction, as well as for the greater good of business, communities and society.

1999 to 2000

Challenging status quo

When the Design Council held their conference in London in March of 1999, there was a desire among design researchers to address the uncertainties facing the "value of design research, the nature of design research, the institutional framework within which such research should be supported and evaluated, and who should conduct it" ("Design Research" 3). While speaker Richard Buchanan noted the continued role traditional "form, function, materials and manner of production" played in what designers do and would continue to do, he also saw great opportunities for designers to explore deeper connections "through an investigation of what makes a product useful, usable, and desirable" ("Design Research" 13).

Later that year, *Design Issues* published an article of his speech titled “Design Research and the New Learning,” where he first outlined his highly acclaimed four orders of design. This simple visual (see page 4) captured the ways designers had been practicing under the symbols and things categories, as well as new areas of design that were beginning to take shape under *action* and *thought*.

After exploring many different researcher’s takes on these orders, I found Milan Guenther, author of *Intersection*, had the best explanation of each of Buchanan’s 4 orders, as he originally intended them to be understood:

- “THE DESIGN OF SIGNS or first order design, is about designing the symbols used in communication processes... It is about conveying messages and persuasive arguments, syntax, and semantics, to enable understanding and facilitate information exchange.
- “THE DESIGN OF OBJECTS or second order design, is about designing physical objects... It is about selecting and using materials, designing tools, and embodying technology, to support usage and integration in a physical context.
- “THE DESIGN OF INTERACTION or third order design, is about designing the behavior of systems and considering the actions of people... It is about designing processes, transitions and activities over time, defining the different states and options to choose from.
- “THE DESIGN OF SYSTEMS or the emerging fourth order design, is about designing dynamic systems and environments... It is about designing the transformation of a system’s structures, functions, and flows, taking a hybrid look at the system and its dimensions and constraints” (Guenther 66).

As you move through the orders, the outcomes begin to change from very concrete ones, such as Graphic Design (first order) and Industrial Design (second order), into more intangible outcomes, such as Interaction Design (third order) and Organizational Design (fourth order). This newer third and fourth order work has a high focus on how people interact with the world around them, such as in service design, and form systems of behavior and purpose, where problems no longer have specific answers, and the art and practice of design must instead focus on finding acceptable solutions within a set of constraints.

Just a few months after Buchanan’s speech at the London Council, the fall publications of magazines *Adbusters*, *Emigre*, and *Eye* concurrently ran the “First Things First Manifesto 2000”. Updated from the 1960s original, this version “called for designers to use their skills to improve environmental, social and cultural life rather than to sell hair gel and dog biscuits” (Lupton and Lupton). Designers were also expressing a desire for

more meaningful work but were frustrated with a widespread lack of opportunity to do so:

“We propose a reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication... toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning” (Barnbrook).

It was a groundbreaking effort across many channels, and it challenged the notion that designers had nothing more to offer than supporting the marketing department’s latest gimmick: “Commercial work has always paid the bills, but many graphic designers have now let it become, in large measure, what graphic designers do” (“First Things First”). It was a call to arms: designers, it argued, were capable of contributing to more important pursuits, pursuits that matter, change lives, and have greater impact.

The manifesto reflected a growing resentment that design — as a profession — had essentially “sold out” by supporting empty consumerism. In Emigre’s intro article to the manifesto, journalist Rick Poynor writes, “Design’s love affair with form to the exclusion of almost everything else lies at the heart of the problem” (Poynor). Many agreed; it was signed by over thirty prominent graphic and product designers, including Ellen Lupton, Milton Glaser, Jonathan Barnbrook, and Katherine McCoy, to name just a few.

In a rebuttal, designer Loretta Staples made the important distinction that designers would first need to ‘get over’ themselves and their own shiny creations if they wanted to move past the stigma of making “eye candy” (Staples). She ends her dissent by challenging the signers “to take a close hard look... take apart everything you ever thought you knew about what you’re doing. Set out in uncharted territory...” (Staples). While the manifesto pushed outward, it was Staples who helped it become a more reflective experience. For the next evolution in design, designers would need to look inward, perhaps accept some hard truths, and ultimately design’s “mythological status” would need to end (Staples).

This meant that in the years that followed, the concept of single-handed design geniuses - a fantasy “perpetuated by both the design community and the media” (Canvs Editorial) - starting giving way to more collaborative, co-creative design work.

2008

Integrating co-creation into business

“When designers even subtly change the framing of the problem they set out to solve, they change the nature of their practice” (Breslin).

There is no better example of the limitations of usability testing alone than seen with the release of the iPod in 2001. While most of the competition had started releasing mp3 devices years prior, the iPod was, by all measures, late to the game. Yet, it had not been a haphazard choice by Apple - it was a calculated move to release it within the crosshairs of wider internet access and broadband speeds capable of handling larger download sizes.

Though there were a multitude of reasons why the iPod was so successful, one major factor was that it went well beyond a limited focus on the user's specific ability to operate it - rather it answered to the user's total experience: the frustrations of slow download speeds, the annoyances of how long it took to find the right song, the desire to purchase individual songs vs whole albums, the fear of downloading a virus, to name just a few. The iPod's holistic, integrated platform (between the device, iTunes, etc) was a clear example that successful products did not happen inside a bubble; organizations would need to understand the environment and experiences of their users beyond operational objectives if they wanted to stay relevant and innovative in an increasingly competitive market.

But, usability could be easily tracked, studied, and proven. It was data obtained via timers, yes or no answers, and check boxes, and could be illustrated on a spreadsheet or a pie chart. Capturing experience was a little trickier. Studying it required asking the right questions, to separate between what the user thinks they want, versus what the user actually wants (or needs). It was a murkier area to explore, and definitely more risky.

Almost no field was more prepared to aid in this transition than designers, who had been using iterative processes of questioning, understanding and testing, both in academic and professional settings, for many years. Though practicing designers knew they could support efforts to capture experiences, others outside the design community were not sure what that work looked like: how did this type of approach differ from traditional methods being used in business settings?

Enter the 2008 article “ZIBA Design and the FedEx Project,” published in *Design Issues*, by researcher

Maggie Breslin. The article studies how ZIBA Design performed work for FedEx that went well beyond the scope of traditional services provided by a product design agency. It was a great “starting point for thinking about how design works in practice when it moves from conventional areas of communication and industrial design into human interaction and organizational change” (Breslin 41). Their work was first to understand the customer’s reality when interacting with FedEx’s physical spaces and technologies, as well as how the customer defined FedEx’s brand, and then set this against FedEx’s impressions of its own spaces, technologies and brand. They created a series of visual maps to chart these various overlapping impressions and experiences.

These maps helped correlate the experiences of the users to the expectations of the organization. The gaps were studied and co-creation teams were used to determine the best ways to bridge the gap: “Waning is our image of a skill-specific designer working in a solitary studio, emerging with unexplainable, but somehow knowable, greatness” (Breslin 42). The evolution of the designer had begun, and some results were in: Designers were redesigning, not only their role, but also what it meant to create a product or service, by shifting an organization towards a product or service, not delivering one from the top down, with little value placed on the stakeholders in between.

These early successes created, perhaps naively, an eagerness to employ design-led strategies and processes without a true appreciation for the designer’s toolkit or design thinking’s methodologies. In his introduction to the Winter 2008 *Design Issues*, “Design and Organizational Change,” Richard Buchanan writes: “Enthusiasm alone, however, will not be enough to sustain interest in design, particularly when the concept of design as a discipline of thinking and making is still widely misunderstood or poorly understood” (“Introduction” 3). One major component lacking clarity was how to best track and measure design-led initiatives to determine their return on investment: “The European commission recognizes that ... measuring design in statistical terms remains problematic, since evaluation is costly and designs contribution cannot easily be extracted from the broader commercial context” (Whicher et al. 47). So while the ZIBA case study illustrated how co-creative, design-led strategies were being applied, wider audiences, including senior leadership and c-suite executives, as well as business more broadly, still needed evidence that it could positively influence an organization’s bottom line. Designers needed to make a case for that “seat at the table” with CEOs, CFOs and other senior executives.

2020

How far have we come?

“A lot of people in our industry haven’t had very diverse experiences. So they don’t have enough dots to connect, and they end up with very linear solutions without a broad perspective on the problem. The broader one’s understanding of the human experience, the better design we will have” (Steve Jobs, 1996).

As Steve Jobs so accurately predicted in 1996, designers have now spent years working with a diverse set of organizations and brands, in different sectors, where understanding the nature of the business’s operations, goals, market, and end users is a required aspect of the job. As a result, designers are equipped to study experiences and consider the connections between all these moving parts.

The design community can now pull from a wide variety of evidence pools to showcase the success of employing design thinking methods, from a one-off project, to the operational approach of an entire organization. Illustrating these accomplishments, *The McKinsey Report* and Forrester’s *Total Economic Impact of IBM’s Design Thinking Practice* have illustrated how design-led initiatives impacted the bottom line - sometimes in staggering ways that go well beyond expectations.

New design-focused positions have started to open up for designers that go beyond traditional applications of form and function inside of the communication department, and new tools have been developed to support these roles, such as service and culture mapping. Designers have applied the design thinking framework with success across the for-profit, public and non-profit sectors, and a multitude of books (such as *Design for the Greater Good* and *Design, When Everybody Designs*) showcase the possibilities designers, and design thinking processes, can achieve across many different kinds of industries.

“As much as we want to let our natural world go undisturbed, a design-focused approach must be taken if our open lands and wildlife are to have a sustainable future. As values, access, and financial incentives evolve, design can bring in the human element, fueled by science” (Wogsland 42).

There are a multitude of case studies illustrating this shift in design, but one of my favorites is “Environment, Meet Design” written by Andrea Wogsland, the development director for *Return to Freedom*, a nonprofit wild horse conservation organization. In this article, she describes how design thinking has aided

conservation efforts, and showcases a number of examples of how a grassroots, human-centered approach helped bring people with various interests together across communities to frame and develop solutions to conflict. All is not warm and fuzzy, however, she warns: "In the environmental sector, design is still searching for a seat at the table" (Wogsland 41). She also describes 3M's former Chief Design Officer Eric Quint's journey, whose role it was "to translate design into science terms and to present the design process as a partner in the discipline of science" (Wogsland 39). Despite his, and others, efforts to bridge these fields, we still have a long way to go (Wogsland 41).

Designers must listen to these calls from our proponents across the discipline divide and reach out - we will need to be able to speak about both the tangible and intangible benefits design can bring to groups who have come together to solve wicked problems, such as in the area of conservation. Though we have witnessed wider adoption of design leadership positions (Wilson), we still are facing many challenges: design ideologies in conflict, the need for reform in design education, a continued lack of understanding as to what designers do, and a cloudy sense of what design leadership is (and should be) responsible for.

The next evolution in design work will again begin by looking inward. Like those who have challenged the status quo over the last twenty years, designers must reflect on our current positions and find inspiration by those who have pushed the boundaries of their roles to explore and apply design in more meaningful, integrated ways - from first order, communication-based work, to forth order, system level work.

Not all designers desire, or are cut out, for these types of holistic, system-focused design work; those that want to must have highly crafted soft skills as well as be adept at seeing patterns, making connections and turning tacit information into explicit knowledge. Design Cybernetics is a field of design that has recently become popular, as it accounts for the physical, technical, biological and social systems integrated into today's most challenging and critical issues (such as sustainability, homelessness, or education reform).

Designers must play a role as designated interlocutors, acting as connectors between both ideas and people, where we use our powers of synthesis to discern and extract the most important moments of human experience, and translate it into actionable data. As the McKinsey report shows: "...T-shaped' hybrid designers, who work across functions while retaining their depth of design savvy, will be the employees most able to

have a tangible impact through their work” (Sheppard et al.) Thus, form and function will always be essential considerations at the root of work for designers. But considerable thought will also need to go into addressing how best we can prepare for and perform in these hybrid thinking roles that are, and will be, needed.

If you visit rare.org, as one example, you can witness the ways all the orders of design have come together in new, exciting ways. From the delightful, engaging visuals and informative, user friendly website, to the development of their Center for Behavior & the Environment, you can see clearly the successful use of design from 1st through 4th order. This nonprofit program challenges traditional climate change tactics by adopting a people centered approach, which incorporates various fields of science with design thinking methods to tackle complex problems related to the climate. We must ask: How can businesses across all sectors employ similar concepts, using design (and designers) to drive innovative ideas, support initiatives, and help measure their success?

The last twenty years has shown us how design and design work has come of age; designers have more opportunity now than ever before to explore and apply design in exciting, deeper ways. There is still work to do, and designers play a significant role in our own transformation, as we seek to strike a balance between our creative, “messy,” curious-driven selves, and our action-oriented, data-driven, strategy focused selves. We must continue to ask: What if? What’s next? What else do we need to know? Why is this important? How best can we relate, support, translate, connect?

appendix II

1.2 What is Conversation Design?

“Conversation Design is the process of designing a natural, two-way interaction between a user and a system (via voice or text) based on the principles of human to human conversation” (Aslet).

The quote above remains one of my favorite—a short, simple way to define it. But therein lies the problem... it's *too* simple. You can trust me when I say that I've spent much of the last year of my life reading about conversation, design, and how best to marry these two concepts together in a way that is approachable, down to earth, yet still based on the latest research. The term “conversation design” has been somewhat hijacked by the AI community, when it should, in fact, continue to include old-school, person-to-person, conversation design as well.

I declare a rewrite!

Conversation Design is the process of designing a natural, two-way interaction between two people, within a group of people, or between a user and a system (via voice or text) based on the principles of human-to-human conversation.”

-Me (inspired by Aslet)

Good human-to-human conversation is needed now more than ever. As we move on to technologically-based conversation, such as AI, we cannot forget the reality that most of us are still stuck in wasteful, purposeless, uninspiring conversation, especially in our workplace meetings. We need to do better. In the next section, I'll talk more about why.

But for now, let's review what we already know. Regardless of whether our conversations are part of official meetings or our morning scrum, the time set aside to converse should have objectives; we should know who to invite (participants), we should have planned out what content

will be considered, and in what venue (or office room) it will be held (Ertel and Solomon). Many companies will get a failing grade just on those basic necessities.

Yet we should be taking our workplace conversations to the next level. They should be *strategic* and *focused*. Achieving this requires a synthesis of styles, a balance between the arts and sciences. It requires trust, the skills of facilitation, support with great visuals, thoughtful, persuasive storytelling, all mixed with the knowledge of what connects human beings, and what we know makes us feel heard and seen.

Conversations should be viewed in the same light as any product or service—the outcome of thoughtful consideration of all the elements long before we enter the room, and then, measured and tracked for success. Designers are prepared to do this kind of work. They are already accustomed to applying methods to understand and capture experience, and can use many honed skills, tools, and methods to aid organizations attempting to achieve better conversation.

But I don't want to over explain it here. I want you to go on the journey and discover it for yourselves.

How To Explore Conversation Design Through This Site

In *Section I* (this section), I will introduce you to the basics—who I am, how I got here, defining conversation design, why I think it's needed, and who influenced me over the last few years as I prepared to tackle this thesis.

Up next, **in *Section II***, we explore *What is conversation?* by defining and reviewing the latest research on human needs in conversation and building on this by examining how conversations with the self, the group, and the organization can together form identity and culture. We also seek to understand what forces undermine good conversational patterns and how formal interlocutor roles throughout org structures could serve as instrumental in transfer of institutional knowledge and help break down silos.

In Section III, we explore *What is Design?* by revisiting the last twenty years, which includes brief explanations and further opportunities to delve into some of the most well-known design niches (from participatory design to cybernetics). We examine a few methods from our deductive and conductive processes, analyze how designers turn abstract ideas into action, and finally, take a look at wicked problems and what role design has in today's interdisciplinary teams.

In Section IV, we connect *conversation* to *design*. Specifically, how do we use the aforementioned design tools from section III to capture the basic human needs we explored in section II. We discuss some essential elements designers need to consider when bridging these together, and end with asking: what value do we bring to organizations as a conversation designer?

Lastly, **in Section IV**, we button it up, starting with how important it is to take a systems approach to design, whether we find ourselves designing conversation or not. I'll offer some pointers based on my research and experience as a whole-brain thinker on the valuable traits you can learn (if you don't already have them!) to guide yourself through the beginning stages of holistic thinking. I also include some additional research in the form of articles, podcasts, and videos, if you would like to explore any of the topics from this site more in depth.

1.3 Why *Design Conversations*?

“A design approach as an integral part of the business strategy enables enterprises to systematically create value propositions for the people they address. It allows us to integrate stakeholder-specific approaches in an overarching vision, and to design artifacts and systems that are useful and meaningful for everyone in touch with the enterprise. It fosters relationships by exploring, meeting, and exceeding real human needs and turning them into business initiatives, products, and services” (Guenther 21).

Many of our businesses are at a critical crossroads: we have recognized the limitations of traditional, bureaucratic, hierarchical top-down styles of operations... And we have recognized the benefits of agile, nimble, human-centered styles of operations.

But appreciation for a design approach hasn't always meant wider adoption. **Why?**

- It's a complicated road - there is no 'one right way' there.

Figuring out the right approach for your organization will need to consider a multitude of factors at the center of feasibility, viability, and meaningfulness.

- It can be costly.

Integrating new software, hiring new people, training - these costs can add up to be a significant investment.

- It doesn't happen overnight.

As this article suggests, instilling a new mindset across an organization may take years to accomplish.

- It requires buy-in from risk-averse stakeholders.

When applying creative processes to strategy development, those more comfortable with

“tried and true” business methods may be skeptical of newer, participatory styles of leadership.

- It is difficult to measure success.

Sometimes a design-led approach results in indirect benefits, which can be difficult to track and measure on a balance sheet.

It would be impossible to address all of these concerns on one site, especially when doing so might require an intricate understanding of a particular organization. But I can advocate for one facet that supports efforts across all five areas: conversation.

Focused, purposeful conversation can help organizations discuss a myriad of paths forward, aiding groups in finding alignment, eliminating unnecessary costs caused by confusion, and it can inform people about the complex topics related to transformation. At its best, conversation can help turn assumptions into understanding, the cynical into the empathic.

But good conversations don't just happen (or rarely do). Just like any great product, they are the result of much planning and consideration, and require a good captain at the helm. Designers, I believe, are up for the challenge of the captain role. The tools and methods employed by designers over the last twenty years have prepared them to tackle the abstract nature of designing conversation.

Poor conversation is a waste of a valuable resource: Time

"Most companies have elaborate procedures for managing capital. They require a compelling business case for any new investment. They set hurdle rates. They delegate authority carefully, prescribing spending limits for each level. An organization's time, in contrast, goes largely unmanaged" (Mankins, Brahm, Caimi).

How is our time spent at work? Often, as Mankins, Brahm, and Caimi write, it is in "phone calls, e-mails, instant messages, meetings, and teleconferences." This causes, they say:

"organizations to become bloated, bureaucratic, and slow" (Mankins, Brahm, Caimi).

Here are a few stats to illustrate the magnitude of the costs associated with poor conversations in our organizations:

- One study showed "a single weekly meeting of midlevel managers cost one organization \$15M a year" (Harvard Business Review). A commenter on this article, Toby Lucich, Principal of Return Leverage, agrees: "It's funny (sad) to me that we invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in new software, process redesign, organizational realignment, and business innovation, and yet we rarely if ever provide the necessary guides or parameters for what constitutes a 'good' meeting. Organizations just 'assume' that meetings create value" (Lucich).

- In Doodle's *2019 State of Meetings* report, US companies wasted over \$399 billion as a result of poorly organized meetings, which resulted in a number of undesirable outcomes: stealing necessary time away from the rest of the respondent's workload, causing confusion around actions and loss of focus on projects, slowing progress, and alienating clients. A whopping 68% of American professionals reported losing "time every week due to unnecessary or canceled meetings" (Doodle).

- A study done by Microsoft, American Online, and Salary.com determined workers only actually worked a total of three days. The other two days were considered time wasted. 'Pointless meetings' were listed at the top of reasons why.

- Also striking - about one third of Americans believed that these poorly organized (or cancelled) meetings were what posed the biggest threat to their company (Doodle). In a simple Google search you can find countless popular articles written about meetings, such as Perlow,

Hadley, and Eun's "Stop the Meeting Madness" and Simon Jenkins "Crushing morale, killing productivity - why do offices put up with meetings?", illustrating a pervasive frustration we are not addressing across business.



The pervasiveness of this meme, while hilarious, represents a widespread and shared frustration across our society about wasted time.

Taken from a more holistic vantage point, this prevalent waste means that our biggest opportunities to converse about strategy, to debate, to clarify, to align, to forecast, to collaborate, prioritize, understand, to frame problems, to form connections... are often considered unstructured, and lack purpose and direction. The cost has been tremendous, impacting the economy's bottom line into the billions, and wreaking havoc on morale.

It means that there are so many missed opportunities for organizations to engage stakeholders around a shared mission, to satisfy the human desire to have value and purpose in their work, to feel a sense of belonging, to create a corporate identity that positively reflects the

millions of tiny touch-points that happen each day within an organization's literal and figurative walls.

And what about time for **reflection**? As John Dewey famously said, "We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience." Various studies agree, the research from one indicates how workers who were given time to reflect outperformed a group who had not: "On average, the reflection group increased its performance on the final training test by 22.8 percent than did the control group," even though the control group worked longer (Nobel). Thus, it is arguably just as important for organizations to give time and purpose to *conversations with the self*, just as time as given to conversations with teams and managers.

I believe the art of conversation design can take back the reins, give workers their valuable time back, save organizations money, improve the experiences around daily communicating and collaborating... among so many other benefits more fully explored throughout this site.

Well-designed conversations mean well-designed management

"When you add the list of emerging opportunities - customer experience, wayfinding, service design, operational processes, branded training, organizational design, decision making, business strategy, and thought leadership - you begin to appreciate the need for strong design management" (Neumeier 98)

For years, designers have fought for a "seat at the table." A recent 2020 study by McKinsey writes: "... designers complained that they needed to be brought into the C-suite to make strategic decisions alongside CEOs and CMOs. That has happened over the past five years, as 40 of the top 100 companies hired a chief design officer (CDO)."

However, leadership lacks clarity about what designers are supposed to do in that role and other positions of design leadership. "I think in some ways the CDO is going to be what the CMO was

20 years ago, when that role was first coming into its own," says Ben Sheppard, McKinsey & Company's Product Development and Design lead. "There was a lack of clarity of scope, how you measure success, and what their role should be in business strategy... You know the head of sales is accountable for hitting sales numbers, and the CEO is accountable for production numbers," says Sheppard, "What the CDO is accountable for is less clear."

As my aim on this site is to elevate the importance of both conversation and design in our businesses, I believe designed conversation should be an integral component of every design leader's responsibility. As we seek to make designers accountable—and their responsibilities more clear—we must consider the management of an overlooked resource, *time*, as part of our duties in ensuring the best experience for the humans working at the heart of our businesses.

We need designers designing conversation

Design the Conversation is not about telling people what to say, how to say it, or when to say it; it is about laying the groundwork for understanding—what human beings need to feel satisfied in conversation, what tools and methods designers have mastered over the last twenty years that could be beneficial to planning purposeful conversations, so we can better engage and align groups who have come together for discussions around concepts both big and small.

But first, you have to start by understanding what is meaningful to people when they converse, what boxes—once checked—allow people to actively listen and empathize, what factors play havoc on our ability to communicate effectively, and how our own internal dialogue can play out in group dynamics. These topics are explored in the next section.

Design the Conversation is research that recognizes that while conversation is an act, it is ultimately the experience of a conversation one walks away remembering.

So... how can designers make it a good one?

2.2: Defining Conversation

As I wrote in "[Why design the conversation?](#)" conversation is an overlooked component of our daily lives, but because it is so intrinsic and routine, it becomes an opportunity for us to explore it more, to understand its inner workings, and provides us a way to improve our experience interacting with other people every day.

Recent studies in the field of human-machine relationships brings a fresh perspective to the topic of conversation. As researchers have worked to understand human needs with regards to the new technologies of ECAs (embodied conversational agents), such as Amazon's Alexa and Apple's Siri, they have often started by studying the nature of human-human conversation as a first step. This new research is a great way for us to gather the most current knowledge on conversation without recreating the wheel. We will explore these needs further in the next post.

Simplistically defined, conversation is the act of *talking*: to yourself or to others. We have imaginary conversations, conversations with organizations, conversations for play with our children, conversations to share concerns. Each has its own unique patterns and qualities. In order to design for it, there needs to be a deeper understanding of what conversations is, such as: what are the types of conversations we have, where do we have them, what type of modes and hierarchies are we familiar with?

In "What is conversation? Can we design for effective conversation?" authors Hugh Dubberly and Paul Pangaro discuss the simple tasks that are part of entering into and maintaining a conversation:

1. Open a channel
2. Commit to engage
3. Construct meaning

4. Evolve
5. Converge on agreement
6. Act or Transact (Dubberly and Pangaro 2-3).

These tasks are visualized in an example of one type of conversation they identify as “conversation for agreement” as seen in Figure 1. This type of conversation is frequently present in our workplace interactions.

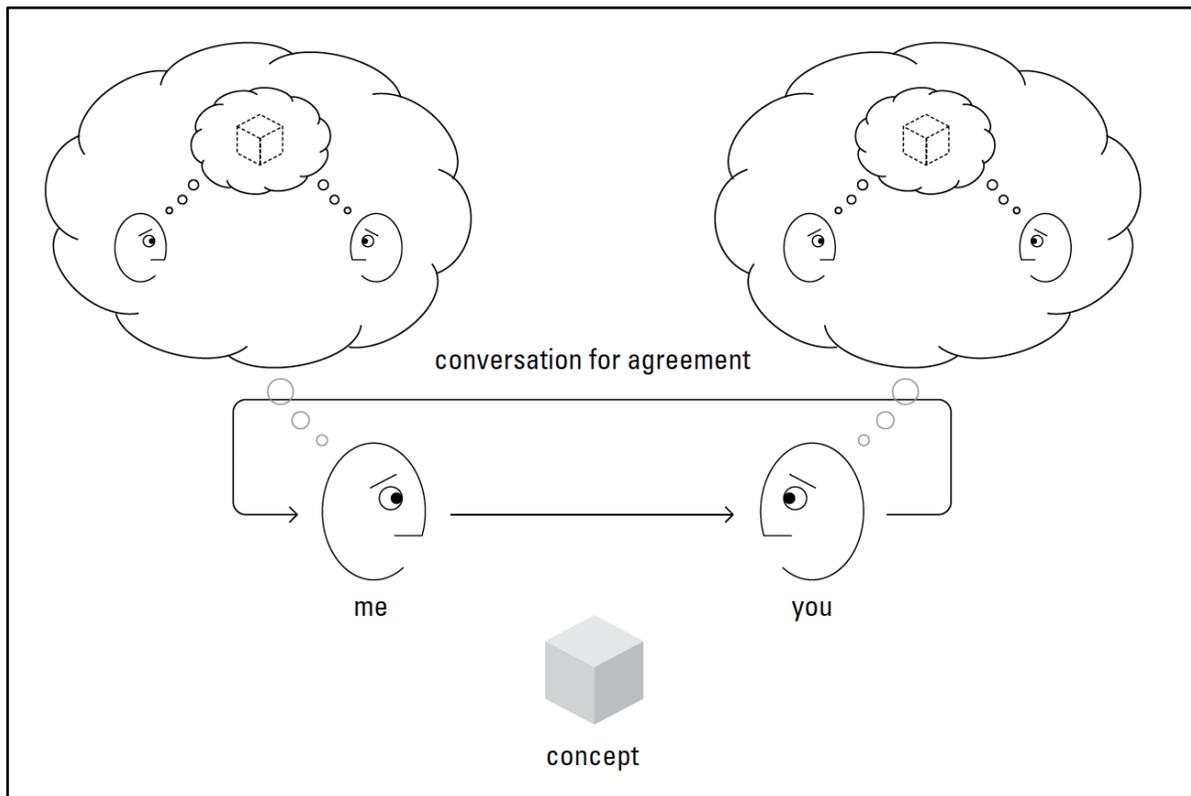


Fig. 1

This image of a conversation also effectively illustrates the internal dialogue that occurs simultaneously with the outward-facing, vocal elements of the conversation. It is imperative, as we define conversation, to consider the presence of this parallel narrative. The goal of this conversation is to try to achieve symmetry between the individual perceptions of the concept at the center of the discussion.

However, this symmetry is often not achieved within a statement or two. Conversations naturally flow through stages of divergence and convergence before they can find such alignment.

Degrees of Interaction within Conversation

Simply calling it “talking” though doesn’t quite capture the *degree* of interaction in conversation. In his article “The Four Types of Conversations,” conflict consultant David Angel identifies four distinct degrees of conversation: discourse, dialogue, diatribe and debate -- each featuring varying expectations of “back and forth,” formal/informalness, and social norms. (see figure 2.)

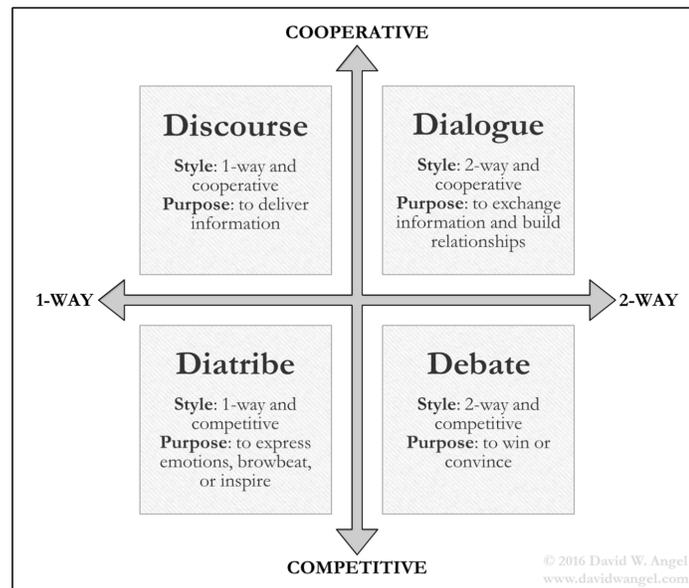


Fig 2. Title

Table 1

Table title

<p><u>Discourse</u></p> <p>Per the image above, the purpose of discourse is “to deliver information.”</p>	<p><u>Dialogue</u></p> <p>The purpose of dialogue is “to exchange information and build relationships.”</p>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You may be familiar with discourse from the popular TED Talks platform • These environments are typically more formal in nature, and there is a limited expectation of sharing experiences or opinions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While similar in nature to discourse, most conversations - from personal to work - live in dialogue aligned spaces. • These environments can be both formal and casual, and there is an expectation for a back and forth exchange of ideas, where knowledge, information or experience is shared.
<p><u>Diatribes</u></p> <p>The purpose of a diatribe is “to express emotions, browbeat, or inspire.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You may be familiar with this type of conversation from CNN, MSNBC or FOX News that feature “talking head” panels of opinionated, soap-box personalities solely focused on sharing their opinions. • These environments can be both formal and informal, but are overwhelmingly one-sided. 	<p><u>Debate</u></p> <p>The purpose of a debate is “to win or convince.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You may be familiar with debates from our recent presidential debates. • These environments are usually formal, and there is limited participation from those listeners outside of the defined conversationalists.

Each of these conversational settings features different styles and purposes, flowing between cooperative spaces and competitive ones. Keep in mind that just because a conversation should be cooperative does not necessarily mean you feel like a contributing member of it, and just

because a conversation is competitive does not mean it is adversarial. Each experience has the opportunity of being a positive or negative one.

Hierarchy within Conversation

We often fail to observe the complex social structures that surround us day to day, that we participate in unknowingly. It is important to recognize how the layers of conversation overlap as well as build upon one another, rather than exist in a bubble.

Conversations with the self can happen while alone (reflecting on the morning's meeting) or within teams (noticing a team member's lateness). Conversations with others can be simple (two co-workers discussing an invite list) or complex (20 members of a C-suite leadership team strategizing and developing the next year's budget). Taken all together, over time, these singular conversations begin to form organizational conversation.

Self, Group, & Organization

While the "self" mode of conversation is fairly straightforward (it happens mostly in one's own mind), group conversation can happen in a variety of modes: in "real time," such as a meeting, or asynchronous, such as a forum. Even within the modes, "real time" can place people in the same place or remotely.* Email often dances between real time and not; we've all had "conversations" via rapid fire email exchanges as well as responses that span the course of days, weeks, or even longer. I'll discuss how self and group conversations form organizational identity in an [upcoming post](#).

You can see all of these factors make for a complicated subject. Ultimately each of these interactions build upon each other. *The Art of Focused Conversation* describes the chaotic nature of attempting to steer through it: "...Group conversations are not simple affairs—they are often more like navigating rapids than paddling down a calm river" (The Institute for Cultural Affairs 30).

For the purpose of this site, however, we are focusing on in-person, real-time conversational spaces within organizational contexts, and in my [next post](#), we will review what human beings need to feel like these conversations connect us, as well as encourage us to be vulnerable, empathetic and open.

*Pandemic work has unprecedented levels of real time / remote conversations, and many of us are aware of the nuances we experience in conversation as a result of this new normal.

2.3 Human Needs in Conversation

“Ah, good conversation - there’s nothing like it, is there? The air of ideas is the only air worth breathing.”

-Edith Wharton

But what makes for good conversation, or the feelings associated with good conversation? In a 2019 human-machine study titled “What Makes a Good Conversation? Challenges in Designing Truly Conversational Agents,” there were four human-human needs most commonly identified in surveys and interviews:

- Mutual understanding & common ground,
- Trust-worthiness,
- Active listenership, and
- Humor (Clark et al. 2).

In workplace environments, where most conversation is task oriented, the authors write “transactional conversation pursues a practical goal, often fulfilled during the course of one interaction. In these types of exchanges, both interlocutors know what the goal of the dialogue is.

They have different clearly-defined roles, and success is measured by the achievement of the transaction's purpose" (Clark et al. 2). Simply put, we want our workplace interactions to include purposeful conversations, where our unique contributions are appreciated, while feeling consistent clarity on how to "move forward" on a task.

Let's review these four areas of need a bit deeper:

Mutual Understanding & Common Ground

In "What Makes a Good Conversation...", the authors write: "Participants stressed the importance of understanding the intent and meaning behind what other speakers are saying... As well as providing a mutually understood focus during interaction, a knowledge of others, supports attempts to reach a common understanding" (Clark et al. 4). In layman's terms, this means that the researchers found we seek alignment between what a speaker is saying and the intentions behind it (sarcasm or passive aggressiveness are examples of tactics that may thwart this), as well as a mutually agreed upon focus (or an agenda) for a conversation to feel *successful*.

This means that *what* you say is often as important as *how* you say it. Tone, volume, and content are playing an important role here in establishing a foundation from which a positive conversation can be held (Ebenstein 26-32). In a work world that has become increasingly collaborative, creating understanding and common ground becomes more and more essential.

A little extra...

The desire for mutual understanding is not a new concept. In Mary Parker Follett's 1924 book, *Creative Experience*, she points out that establishing *common ground* does not mean establishing *agreement*. Rather it is an act of information and experience sharing that explores a concept through to a point where conversationalists begin to see eye to eye, even if they do not yet agree on how best to move forward.

We need experts, we need accurate information, but the object is not to do away with *difference* but to do away with *muddle*. When for lack of facts you and I are responding to a different situation—you to the situation as you imagine it, I to the situation as I imagine, it—we cannot of course come to agreement... If I think I am looking at a black snake and you think it is a fallen branch, our talk will be merely chaotic. But after we have decided that it is a snake, we do not then automatically agree what to do with it. You and I may respond quite differently to “black snake”... Difference based on inaccuracy is meaningless. We have not done away with difference, but we have provided the possibility for fruitful difference. (Follett 6).

Thus, explaining our viewpoints regarding the shared situations, agendas, or outcomes are helpful steps to satisfying our need to establish mutual understanding and common ground in conversation. By erasing the *muddle* first, we can begin to converse upon how best to move forward.

Trustworthiness

Another important quality the researchers identified in “What Makes a Good Conversation...” was humans’ desire to trust our conversational partners. They write: “having trust in a partner seems to be a gateway to open the possibility of more personal conversations” (Clark et al 4). In the workplace, where communication can often be superficial or short term, trust can be elusive to cultivate; we jockey for roles, we lose important bids, we may not see certain members of a team day to day. This makes it difficult, though not impossible, to develop any workplace as a deeply rooted “safe space” in the same way we can in our personal lives.

Our intrinsic need for trust is reiterated in a *The New York Times Magazine* article titled “What Google Learned from Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team” where researchers in Google’s *Project Aristotle* team found that:

...to be fully present at work, to feel 'psychologically safe,' we must know that we can be free enough, sometimes, to share the things that scare us without fear of recriminations. We must be able to talk about what is messy or sad, to have hard conversations with colleagues who are driving us crazy. (Duhigg).

When we trust our co-workers, colleagues, team members, managers and leaders, we feel safe to be vulnerable, think outside the box, challenge ourselves and our preconceived ideas, and apply failure as an essential step towards success, rather than a reflection on our capabilities.

A little extra...

In *I Hear You*, author Donny Ebenstein discusses the role vulnerability plays in establishing trusting relationships and open conversation in the workplace.

Many stuck situations become intractable because neither side wants to share emotions for fear of appearing weak. This can lead to a standoff, with no progress being made.

Sometimes expressing one's emotions in a non-threatening and vulnerable manner can elicit empathy from the other side, changing the entire dynamic. (Ebenstein 28).

Trust can be built by opening yourself up, expressing your true feelings and creating a safe place for others to share their impressions and reactions as well. However, this cannot be a manipulative tactic to get what you want, otherwise long-term trust will never be achieved. Genuine care and a true desire to move a conversation forward must be at the heart of any purposeful conversation.

- **Active Listening**

"Participants described that paying attention, demonstrating engagement and a willingness to participate in conversation was important in two-way interactive dialogue" (Clark et al. 4). Yet in today's information-overloaded workplaces (and lives!) gaining true active listenership can be challenging. We have all been in meetings with our colleagues who are tapping away on laptops or

cell phones as we wonder if they are taking engaging notes or replying to an unrelated email. Even we might look actively engaged, but instead are making mental notes about our children's schedules or grocery lists.

In *Let the Story Do the Work*, author Esther Choy acknowledges this reality: "There's no question that setting aside our thoughts and worries to focus on what others have to say can be challenging and energy-consuming" (Choy 141). She promotes the concept of *aggressive listening* and provides ideas that may aid in letting go and truly plugging in (Choy 142-147). Her advice (given to her by her former Northwestern University professor Paul Arntson): "For every one part talking, do three parts listening" (141). Adhering to a 75-to-25% listening to talking ratio (141) may, at first, feel slightly awkward while in the midst of a conversation - but with some practice and awareness, it isn't too difficult to achieve.

A little extra...

Listening well goes beyond two-person and group situations within the organization. Listening is an important quality of leadership as well, helping to engrain the quality as an essential expectation of operations. In "Leadership is a Conversation" Groysberg and Slind promote "conversational intimacy" by the leadership level of an organization: "True attentiveness signals respect for people of all ranks and roles, a sense of curiosity, and even a degree of humility" (Groysberg and Slind 79).

Listening becomes especially important as technology allows managers and leaders to blanket workers with messaging. "For many executives and managers, the temptation to treat every medium at their disposal as if it were a megaphone has proved hard to resist. In some companies, however, leaders have fostered a genuinely interactive culture - values, norms, and behaviors that create a welcoming space for dialogue" (Groysberg and Slind 80).

In *The Art of Focused Conversation*, this need for organizations to shift from top-down information flow systems to those with information flows going “in every direction, up, down, sideways and diagonally” requires leaders to move away from “being charismatic decision-makers and infallible bosses to becoming people who facilitate questioning” (Institute for Cultural Affairs 12-13). Leaders who see facilitation as an important skill will be increasingly desired in today’s marketplaces. “...These days everyone wants to participate in everything, and those who can facilitate a useful conversation will be at a premium” (Institute for Cultural Affairs 13). Shifting this approach to leadership will require managers to see their roles as drivers of information by asking the right questions to elicit useful knowledge; listening will be an essential component of this style of operating.

- **Humor**

In “What Makes Good Conversation...” participants often noted humor as an essential element of good conversation, but warned against that which is disingenuous. It needs to have “substance and relevance to the conversation” noting humor’s ability to “soften serious intentions or deliver substantive message in conversation” (Clark et al. 5).

This means that while humor may be welcome, it must be used appropriately and respectfully. We’ve all seen an episode of *The Office* where Michael Scott’s version of humor made us cringe; it is important to recognize when it is appropriate to insert humor and how to craft it in a way that adds rather than undermines.

That said, humor comes in a variety of forms and can often provide a sense of fun into a long work week as well as be a source of brevity; we’ve all chuckled at the Southwest announcer who playfully turns the safety lecture into something more palatable. In the 2016 article “Getting Serious about funny: Psychologists see humor as a character strength” Janet Gibson writes: “Positive

psychology, a field that examines what people do well, notes that humor can be used to make others feel good, to gain intimacy or to help buffer stress... And humor activities or exercises result in increased feelings of emotional well-being and optimism" (Gibson). In other words, when co-workers are having a good time, it feels a lot less like *work*.

A little extra...

In the 2013 study, "Laughing and liking: Exploring the interpersonal effects of humor use in initial social interactions," researchers performed a series of experiments to understand the relationship between humor and liking. The authors conclude: "Our results supported ideas of prior researchers who have proposed that people can use humor to signal liking or to simply establish closeness with an unacquainted other... One of the most fundamental and powerful human motivations is to form bonds with others" (540). In workplace settings where there is a plethora of "unacquainted" co-workers and infrequent team members, activities that include humor may aid in more quickly creating the intimacy needed to successfully tackle a project.

All the ingredients

In reality, these four areas of identified needs are not neatly wrapped up into clear cut categories. Humorous activities designed to foster "openness," for example, may also allow us to both *actively listen* as well as to *build trust*. It is important not to view each of these as segregated concepts, but rather as a way to identify ingredients that are all needed in the pie, often in different proportions, but each a necessary area to identify and consider.

Are our needs being met?

If we look back at a previous post, "[Why Design the Conversation?](#)" we can see that many of our workplace conversations are not achieving this degree of satisfaction. We are dealing with an

epidemic of workers who often leave conversations feeling stuck, frustrated, devalued, or lacking clarity about our specific role in the project or *next steps*.

2.4 Identity forms Culture

"Identity may in some ways be a better way to capture this central strategic cultural element than to call it culture... maybe the word identity fits better for this particular phenomenon" (Schein).

In our day-to-day workplace lives, we rarely sit around reflecting on the ways our last meeting represents our organization's broader belief paradigm. Instead we mull things over in small pieces, on the way back to our office space: "Hey, it's great that the meeting finished early; now I can get my report done before lunch!" or "Bob shot down almost everyone's ideas today; he is such a buzzkill!"

Over time, however, all these little conversations we have with ourselves and our co-workers begins to write an overarching narrative. This story plays out over and over, becoming like Lego pieces—interconnected as they build upon one another. Often, it becomes the lens through which the organization sees itself, both individually and collectively, as a shared identity.

Identity "manifests itself implicitly in the habits, assumptions, beliefs and attitudes which are shared by its staff and which underpin the organization's activities. Culture becomes visible to people inside and outside its boundaries in emerging explicit expressions, as symbols, messages, conversations, and behaviors" (Guenther 96). Essentially, identity is the composite of abstract concepts we carry around in our minds, molded constantly by each touchpoint we have with

individuals, groups, technologies, leaders, messaging, etc. Culture then, is the outward expression of a shared identity.

Author Donny Ebenstein writes in his book, *I Hear You*: "It's hard to observe the system when you are inside it" (147). When a leader or manager is conflict-adverse, as one example, internal thoughts across the entire team identify moments of frustration, fear, or shock—all separately. An identity begins to form, where each member accepts, either consciously or not, that *opinions are not shared*.

Following suit, the culture may become one of avoidance, as everyone knows contrary opinions are not allowed. This dynamic may become dysfunctional and collapse quickly; or it may just be a low current that ebbs on for years. It is hard to see how you might be contributing to this shared mindset - we usually find others in the system to be *at fault*, broadly accepting certain norms as beyond our control. "The reciprocal reinforcement of these personal and systemic issues occurs when the firm begins to replicate the personality of the conflict adverse founder" (Ebenstein 162).

In his book *Good Talk* conversation designer Daniel Stillman discusses how conversations have "operating systems" - which is the code consisting of "our unique arrangement of habits, rules, and beliefs" (40). As we label each interaction throughout the day -- "slow progress", "responsive!", "awkward meeting", or "that was helpful!" -- we begin to see patterns in our everyday world. These perceived patterns help us define our environments; we essentially learn what works (or what doesn't!) and continue to follow the same paths. Not unlike the Colorado River flowing through the Grand Canyon: years of ingrained behaviors form a groove we all eventually recognize and join.

You can't use conversation to address culture. Culture is the by-product; once you encounter it, there isn't much more you can do but acknowledge it. However... you can harness the power of great conversation to understand identity - this can influence an organization's mindset at the root.

----- // SECTION START

THEY SAID IT BETTER

Peter Senge & The Learning Organization

“Managers need to realize that once they begin to use conversation rather than make edicts, they have crossed a threshold. They are creating a different kind of organization - the learning or partnership organization” (The Institute of Cultural Affairs 142).

Chances are you've already heard of Peter Senge (or read a quote by him somewhere along the way). He is the author of the acclaimed book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization*, as well as a lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management. Senge promotes changing the role of leadership from a traditional top-down approach to one of inquisition, in turn placing higher value in the act of learning as part of how an organization operates and strategizes.

As any business leader can attest to, however, this is not easy to attain, especially if the established paradigm is one of control and it has been ingrained within the organization's identity over many years. In 1993, not soon after Senge published *The Fifth Discipline*, Harvard Business School professor David Garvin writes: “discussions of learning organizations have often been reverential and utopian, filled with near mystical terminology” (Garvin) and challenges scholars to focus more on the “gritty details of practice” rather than “high philosophy and grand themes” (Garvin). He wonders, how would an organization recognize it has become a learning organization? What metrics and measurements are there as a means of integration? (Garvin). These are all valid concerns; many field guides have been written in the years since to aid leaders with these specifics.

<<< insert video:<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vc2ruCErTok>

“How do you define a learning organization?” >>>

In the video, Senge quickly explains what makes an institution a “learning organization,” stressing the importance of getting rid of the jargon that turns people off up front, while also developing the institutional tools, philosophy, and infrastructure needed to support a transition away from an overly controlled environment to one that promotes learning.

Conversation, through the act of participation, is one powerful way organizations can challenge status quo, and distribute power and voice throughout the ranks. Open dialogue and a sense of contribution will shift a culture of control and suppression, to one of openness, which promotes learning. “Today it’s not *‘business as usual’* anymore. The rules have changed and continue to change. The new rules are the rules of networks, not hierarchies” (Sanders). This viewpoint—that users are seen as active co-creators and partners in a networked and connected way—goes hand-in-hand with learning organizations.

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The Power of Negative Narratives

Humans seek patterns. Author Esther Choy writes of us: “It is our innate nature to connect the dots” (Choy 19). But what happens when a narrative, written over time based on a perceived identity, needs to be rewritten? “Once a story has taken root in hearts and minds, it’s extremely difficult to challenge its validity. As a leader, if you don’t connect the dots proactively... others will fill it in for you” (Choy 20).

Yet leaders rarely come to their positions at the *beginning*, where they can help shape their team or organization’s culture; most positions come with inherited baggage and assumptions, and eventually—unless resisted—an indoctrination into *this is how we do things here*.

The good news is that very few organizations are without some positive cultural component to build off of - and that is where the conversation can often get off the ground - *what are we doing right?* What is working? What is engaging people?

Developing an *attack* strategy, built off of open and honest communication, incorporating elements of all four human conversational needs can begin to address an established negative narrative. Over time, this corporate story can be changed; but everyone will need to participate in the heavy lifting.

When Value Statements and Identity Don't Align

In 1994, a book titled *Built to Last* entered the scene. Written by Jim Collins and Jerry Porras, it touted the benefits of developing and publishing an organization's core values, "provoking managers to stampede to off-site meetings in order to conjure up some core values of their own" (Lencioni). This "fad," as Lencioni labels it, is still an intrinsic part of many companies today.

Here are a few examples of some famous companies' values:

AARP: Impact, Innovation, Humanity, Empowerment and Honesty

Netflix: integrity, excellence, respect, inclusion, and collaboration.

Facebook: Be Bold, Focus on Impact, Move Fast, Be Open, Build Social Value

Let's briefly compare Facebook's core values with recent headlines.

From 2016 to 2018, Facebook faced a series of backlashes after a number of articles illustrated how a political consulting firm had "improperly accessed the data of 50 million Facebook users" (later revised to more) and detailed the resulting efforts to sway the 2016 election (Rodriguez). Cnbc.com writes of the debacle:

The company's clumsy response to the reports didn't help. Facebook first tried to get ahead of the reports by publishing a Friday night blog post on March 16, saying it was suspending

Cambridge Analytica for improperly accessing user data. After the reports went live on Saturday, Sandberg and the rest of the company did not address the public for five days. (Rodriguez).

The breach of privacy, the delayed response time, the influence on an open election—all were actions that negated Facebook’s stated values, especially the *move fast, be open, and build social value* tenets. The results are clear: there are about 15 million fewer users from 2017 to early 2019 (Edison Research).

Though this cannot be completely attributed to the scandal (competition, like SnapChat, has also left its mark), the friction between stated values and actual behavior causes havoc on all stakeholders - from users to employees to advertisers. “Empty values statements create cynical and dispirited employees, alienate customers, and undermine managerial credibility” (Lencioni). Thus, organizations in the stages of creating or revising their value statement need to take a hard look at themselves *first* so values don’t become “lip service.”. Values and identity in conflict do more harm than good.

Conversation that addresses the organization in its true state, rather than its desired state, is an essential component of this process. “Values can set a company apart from the competition by clarifying its identity and serving as a rallying point for employees. But coming up with strong values—and sticking to them—requires real guts” (Lencioni). These communication spaces need to be open, welcoming, and safe, where ideas are not shot down immediately.

2.5 Forces Undermining Good Conversation

"...no design brief, whether it guides, steers, or dictates, can address the psychology of human interaction. How do you navigate the treacherous waters of clashing opinions, narrow viewpoints, secret feelings, and asynchronous aspirations as you strive for consensus?" (Neumeier 111)

I would be remiss if I didn't devote time to acknowledging those internal thoughts, frustrating team members, and systemic challenges we face when we've decided to have more purposeful conversations. If you refer back to my post "[Defining Conversation](#)" you'll recall the three hierarchies where conversation occurs - within the self, within the group, and within the organization. Let's take a look at some significant detractors from positive, effortless and purposeful conversations at these three levels.

The Self

"Fear of failure, aversion to unpredictability, preoccupation with status - these are the prime assassins of innovation" (Neumeier 40).

If conversation was an iceberg, internal dialogue would be the very deepest, most hidden part. We often cannot control our very own reactions, curiosities, presumptions; it would be unwise for any team or organization to think they could either.

But understanding those reactions and feelings, acknowledging our own darker thoughts that at best, contradict what we say, at worst, undermine the effectiveness of our teams and projects, is an important step in moving forward into a more honest and open space to communicate within.

A frequent culprit is fear. Fear shows up at every level, but identifying it at the deepest and darkest level (inside your head) first may help team members or leaders wrangle it before it weaves itself throughout the organization. "One of our consistent and most noteworthy observations over

the past 15 years is how strong a motivator fear can be in the workplace, how it manifests in most companies, how irrational it can be, and how it has tremendously negative effects on many organizations” (Yorton 7). Per Yorton, these fears can include risk taking, new ideas, confronting a colleague, public speaking and even asking to take vacation time (7).

Fear can immobilize and cause you to feel stuck in the same communication patterns with the same frustrating results.

The Group

There are so many types of detractors in the workplace, we could probably create an entire site identifying these troublemakers. Instead, let's just focus on a few notorious ones, and if you're interested in reading a few more, here is a list of some additional [offender profiles](#).

The good news is that there is hope here; the majority of people aren't just plain and simply lousy, one dimensional characters in a movie. "...Allow me to stipulate that there are crazy (and evil and stupid) people out there, with whom the situation truly is hopeless. But that population of extreme people is actually a tiny fraction of the people most of us deal and struggle with daily” (Ebenstein 24). Identifying the type of conversational challenger you are working with isn't about judgement; it is about empowering yourself to identify patterns, change tactics, and hopefully, shift dynamics by using different conversational styles to get unstuck.

- [The Yabut](#)

The “yeah, but” offenders can feel like a rain cloud that follows a project or team around, killing new ideas before they gain traction, keeping members from contributing, and stifling conversation. As author (and professor emeritus at University of Nebraska) Marvin Knittel, Ed.D. writes on PsychologyToday.com, the behavior of the yabuts are driven by a need to feel in control and a desire to convey their intelligence (Knittel). This causes us to feel dismissed or discounted, and ensures that any new ideas land squarely *inside* the box.

- The *Distracted*

In our busy world, it is hard to avoid being the distracted member in your group. I can think of countless meetings I have appeared to listen, but instead I'm making mental checklists, rehearsing a presentation, or stepping out to answer an important call. I've also been in meetings while others tapped loudly away on laptops, wondering *what the hell are they doing?* and allowing myself to be distracted by other distracted people. It can be a domino effect and the end result may be a purposeless meeting or a lack of clarity.

- The *Dominator*

Loud, boastful, know-it-all, opinionated: we've all been on a team, either in school or in the workplace that included a dominator. While they often can take leadership roles, especially as meeker or less confident members shy away, they create a vacuum of powerlessness, and can detract as much from the group spirit as they may bring to it.

In Google's years-long quest to understand and form more effective teams, one trait turned out to play a major factor in a team's success: turn-taking. "...On the good teams, members spoke in roughly the same proportion, a phenomenon the researchers referred to as 'equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking.' On some teams, everyone spoke during each task; on others, leadership shifted among teammates from assignment to assignment" (Duhigg). The study's lead author, Anita Woolley says: "As long as everyone got a chance to talk, the team did well... But if only one person or a small group spoke all the time, the collective intelligence declined" (Duhigg). This provides further evidence that dominators play a major role in thwarting group success, even if superficially they appear to be charming and engaging.

The Organization

Conversational standards can also be set at the organizational level and trickle down, in the same way internal thoughts can trickle out and up. Let's take a look at a few ways this can happen.

- The Untouchable CEO

Look no further than the case of Uber's leader Travis Kalanick for evidence of how a bulletproof (metaphorically speaking) and toxic CEO can infiltrate the entire organization's culture. Sure, most of us are not working in an organization with this concentrated degree of mismanagement, but it's a good case study about how offensive, but accepted, behaviors within leadership create a dysfunctional, corrupt and widespread dynamic (Swisher). (Read "With her blog post about toxic bro-culture at Uber, Susan Fowler proved that one person can make a difference" for a complete version of this event.)

In *I Hear You*, author Donny Ebenstein describes another type of untouchable: the "superhero organization" (159). He writes: "These organizations are built around and reliant on a single individual. In such a context, there is an inevitable systemic effect on how people interact with this 'superhero'" (Ebenstein 159). Not only does this create hierarchical imbalances of power, it can lead to an environment of "yes-men" (this is only a phrase, it could equally be men or women), where there is no one willing to speak up and be a voice of dissent. On an individual level, this breeds employee resentment, but on the organizational level, when no one is willing to point out a mistake and the unwritten rule is *keep it to yourself*, it can create blind spots that can be dangerous or disastrous for the business.

Silos

"Many large organizations are divided, and then subdivided into numerous different departments, which often fail to talk to each other—let alone collaborate" (Tett 13).

Research by anthropologist Robin Dunbar suggests that humans naturally begin to form silos around 150 people (Ro). What impact does this phenomenon have on the organization?

In terms of conversational impact, silos wreck havoc on collaboration and diversity within teams, and the outcome is often group-think (Guenther 52) as well as a short-sighted operation. Anthropologist (and journalist and author) Gillian Tett notes in her book *The Silo Effect* that silos no longer “just refer to a physical structure or organization” but has become so popularized in our lexicon that it is now understood to be a “state of mind” (Tett 13). When silos begin to build an *us* versus *them* mindset, it can cause a behavior we know as ‘tribalism’ - while “rooted in one of our most positive human qualities -- an ability to identify closely with others and to form strong bonds of trust,” it can also have a sinister effect within organizations, breeding suspicion, and causing “group members so closely align and identify with their own unit that they see other groups or parts of the organization as competitors, obstacles or threats” (Bradberry). This scenario is a win for no-one.

Conversation suffers when people who are technically “on the same team” see each other as adversaries and refuse to see (and participate in) the bigger picture. When blind spots form within an organization’s accepted culture, it undermines and cuts across all four of our human needs (see previous blog post on “[Human Needs in Conversation](#)”). Tribal allegiances reduce our ability to empathize with other individuals and groups, build alignment on strategic initiatives and often provide those previously discussed ‘conversation offenders’ an uncontested platform.

2.6 CONNECTING THE DOTS

"The challenge is to facilitate these dialogues, making people talk to each other and helping them to translate between their individual languages and viewpoints. This is particularly true for any approach to tackling a complex relationship challenge, where different domains need to be blended in order to turn them into a coherent strategy" (Guenther 48).

As we begin to shift from a focus on conversation to design, I want to start making a case for the *designated interlocutor* role (or many!) within the organization. Across my research, this concept came up again and again, and it became hard to ignore the possibilities and benefits this could have on organizations, especially those struggling to break down silos, change identity based corporate narratives, or identify teams whose 'conversational needs' were not being met.

The *name* may be different. Some authors referred to these roles as hybrid thinkers, connectors, mediators or even "cultural translators" but the concept was the same: these were cross-departmentally aligned communicators focused on sharing institutional knowledge, breaking down barriers (or silos) with an open minded attitude, and encouraging a shared language upon which better understanding could be built. "People in connector roles have to balance the different modes of thinking and possess domain knowledge in different areas," author Milan Guenther writes in *Intersection*. Yet, he adds, this knowledge must also go in hand in hand with soft skills, "such as leadership, social dynamics, communication, and creativity" (Guenther 52). These newly inspired roles will require special talent and training, but once in place may be considered the glue that holds vertically shaped organizations in new, horizontal patterns.

In a 2019 study titled, "Stronger Syntactic Alignment in the Presence of an Interlocutor," Schoot, Hagoort, and Segaert examined the ways in which conversation partners influence each other. They studied how an interlocutor affects *syntactic priming*, which is our natural human

“tendency to repeat or more easily process a current sentence that is similar in structure to a previously presented prime” (Wikipedia). Essentially this means that when one person is priming a group for discussion (i.e., asking questions, explaining the topic at hand, reviewing important information), the conversational partners are more likely to repeat or use the same words in the same patterns. The researchers found “syntactic alignment is stronger in the presence of an interlocutor than when no interlocutor is present (i.e., primed by a recording)” (Schoot et al. 6).

This research suggests that having a conversational *mediator* or *facilitator* can align people whose day to day work may employ a different language,* reducing the possibility for misinterpretations or confusion.” A mediator can listen to each side’s perspective, and simultaneously help each party listen to and understand the other side’s perspective. Charles Duhigg agrees, writing: “Don’t underestimate the power of giving people a common platform and operating language” (Duhigg). A mediator bridges the gaps in understanding between parties. It is this fostering of mutual understanding, in turn, that unlocks the situation and opens up new possibilities for the parties to communicate with one another and to ultimately think creatively about possible solutions that had not yet been considered before” (Ebenstein 4).

The business world needs to employ the broader use of formal interlocutors to form bridges between groups of people who might speak different languages or may even have conflicting incentives and objectives. These hybrid thinkers will aid in reducing organizational blind spots, group think and tunnel vision, encourage team diversity, and promote safe, open communication with equal distribution of turn-taking. But most importantly, they will serve as the connection between organizational activities and knowledge, acting as the bridge between people and strategy.

*In this instance, I'm referring to the languages of different disciplines, not the use of different languages between cultures or ethnicities. I.e. The words chosen by software engineers may differ from the words chosen by painters to explain the exact same situations, documents, experiences, etc.

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DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

Cross-disciplinary communicators and dissent

In *The Silo Effect*, former Bank of England deputy governor Paul Tucker discusses the 2008 Financial Crisis, including the economists activities and blind spots that helped set the stage for the disaster. One area he blames is the gap between areas of expertise in the field: "In the past we had underlap because things fell between the cracks of what the regulators looked at. Today we have overlap, because we want to prevent silos" (Tett 134). In the overlap spaces now, he promotes "cultural translators" to aid in communication silos. "You don't need everyone to be a cultural translator," he says, "but any large organization needs to have somebody, or some people, who can play that translation role" (Tett 249).

The purpose of these roles however, cannot exist without acknowledging the important role *dissent* will play; collaborative spaces are not kum-ba-ya circles and thus dissent plays a critical role in positive outcomes. Our organizations need to embrace constructive criticism. But when is dissent appropriate?

Within the context of design flows between divergent and convergent thinking, discussed further in my post "[Twenty Years in Design](#)", the pervasive opinion in organizations is that dissent is only welcome during planning stages. David Garvin, professor at Harvard Business School, disagrees and explains why dissent is also essential during execution phases:

<<< insert video:<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vc2ruCErTok>

“Always be Open to Dissenting Opinions” >>>

During the financial crisis, these hybrid, cross-silo, cross-institution “translators” could have become the much-needed voices of dissent, using skills in communication and pattern recognition to blow holes in the dangerous degrees of tunnel vision. Tett writes: “bankers in large organizations are often trained and incentivized to only focus on the bits of finance that sit directly under their noses” (224) and ultimately “price distortions kept appearing in the markets because different teams of financiers had peculiar patterns of incentives or simply did not talk to each other or swap information” (244). The very few financial institutions on the fringe who were willing to step back and view the market from a more holistic point of view did not suffer the same fate during the 2008 crisis. In fact, some of them thrived.

In “Is organizational dissent important? The consequences of speaking up when you disagree at work,” there are two noted areas impacted by a lack of ingrained acceptance of dissent: “Strategically speaking, the absence of dissent kills innovation [where] the real casualty is the organization’s ability to learn from its environment...” (Pianesi) as well as “...culturally speaking, the absence of dissent breeds disengagement... When disengagement is a form of dissent (i.e., “I don’t care anymore. I just do what I am supposed to do.”), it becomes endemic and hard to eradicate.” (Pianesi). Ultimately, Pianesi attributes a feeling of powerlessness within organizations that oppress dissent, often labeling these voices as complainers and troublemakers, or questioning their loyalty to the team.

This illustrates the importance of addressing negative narratives, identity (and culture), as well as defining the operational values of your organization before a network of hybrid roles could be successfully integrated. These facilitators and mediators play an

important role bridging the gaps between departments, groups, and information. It is essential they feel safe being the “but, wait!” voice of dissent, when necessary.

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Designing for common ground & understanding

“When approaching a strategic conversation, it’s common for participants to push to push for agendas that drive faster toward agreement and decision-making than is realistic. That’s a problem because people need time and space to process together the complexity of adaptive challenges”

In our pursuits for “fruitful difference,” Mary Parker Follett writes: “Difference based on inaccuracy is meaningless” (Follett 6). This is just as true today (see “[Human Needs in Conversation](#)”) where groups of people come together like never before - and need to define and consolidate perspectives before they can ever achieve true alignment around an issue, project, strategy, etc.

As we move toward work environments that are increasingly collaborative, who is taking ownership for guiding these teams through the chaotic process of early understanding - between each other, the subject matter, or the organization’s expectations? Who is ensuring the data upon which groups begin to share an understanding is accurate, informative, and engaging?

It isn’t all up to designers (that would be impossible!) but designers should be playing a greater role in considering *the experience* of conversation, similar to widely established expectations for designers’ role in the design of products or services. Trained in disciplinary research across psychology, computer science, linguistics and anthropology, designers in these roles can support

organizations whose values and missions are built upon openness, loyalty, and innovation. Careful, focused, and purposeful conversation is a vehicle for achieving these goals.

Three Considerations of Designing Conversations to Establish Common Ground

- Embrace the tension

Oftentimes, when groups are trying to create unified, broad understanding, members get caught up in efforts to find consensus; essentially, they skip a few steps and begin efforts to persuade. This is a natural human tendency and may reflect an individual or group's bias towards a particular outcome, especially when that outcome is beneficial to them, such as bonuses, recognition, etc.

Designing conversations strategically, however, anticipates the natural human tendency to resolve tension and "achieve" inauthentic alignment.

"Creative tension is one of the (if not THE) most fundamental principles of design. Great designers have had a capacity to plant a flag on a seemingly impossible future and then found a way to arrive there, inspiring those around them" (Starnino).

One way designers "find a way to arrive" through the tension is constructive criticism. Over the course of our education and practice, even the most soft-skinned of us have developed an appreciation for this invaluable step in our design process, even if it brings a degree of discomfort. Constructive critique challenges our tunnel vision, preconceived notions, our automated responses, and frames our concepts in new light. We know our work is better with it than without it; critical analysis, tension, and redesign are integral parts of any successful design process.

Our team members from other fields may be less experienced in this process and initially, may be less open to it. When open feedback is shared, these individuals may retreat to 'save face' (Marsh). Their true feelings may be hidden underneath politeness or evasive tactics. These are often

not malicious in intent; in fact, they are tactics mostly employed to avoid hurting another person's feelings or feeling humiliated in front of others (Marsh).

In *The Designful Company*, author Neumeier discusses the tension between expression and impression as a tug of war that, if executed adeptly, becomes a bit like an accordion as it moves back and forth. "When small teams or individuals work separately (expression), they bring deep experience to bear. When they work together (impression), they expose their opinions to a wider view. By working back and forth from expression to impression, the result is not compromise but addition. The sum of each session is a measurable leap in shared thinking" (Neumeier 110-11). Much like prior discussion around deductive and conductive processes, the back-and-forth between modes of "expression" and "impression" can build upon one another and create a shared foundation of common ground around an issue.

Allowing an equal flow between modes is an art in which conversation designers must be skilled. Exploring this tension (rather than running from it) is an essential component of forming understanding and can stop any one individual or group of people dominating by jumping ahead and attempting to persuade.

- Use of verbal signifiers

In our day-to-day routines, we often overlook the delicate conversational dances we perform. This is never more evident than in the words and phrases we use as we try to lay the groundwork towards insight. You might be familiar with a few: "Tell me more..." or "Do you mean..." or "Am I hearing you say..."

As mentioned above, humans are naturally drawn to harmony in group dynamics. Our minds and bodies desire a state of equilibrium, and we can—often without realizing it—encourage movement quickly through a discovery phase that lacks any significant *discovery*. We nod while going

“mm-hmm,” we might say “I see” when we do not, we give half-truths, and we circumvent to avoid hurt feelings.

Consider this example in Jessica Marsh’s article “What say it that way?: Evasive answers and politeness theory,” where she illustrates how elusive or polite answers can create a lack of clarity on someone’s intent:

“(15) *A has posted a poem on an internet forum.*

A: What do you think of this poem: I want to send it to my girlfriend?

B: You put a lot of effort, and i’m sure she’ll appreciate it” (Marsh 67).

Marsh explains: “...B’s answer could well be taken to implicate, ‘I don’t like your poem.’ However, it is impossible to judge for certain whether this is in fact how B intends A to interpret his/her response” (Marsh 71).

A designer mediating conversation would be on the lookout for such types of answers and would aid in challenging “B” to expand on their response with verbal cues that solicit additional “needs” in a non-threatening way. Whereas someone inexperienced with conversation may quip “that didn’t answer the question,” a designer experienced with asking questions that draws people out into safe, contemplative spaces can clarify expectations. For example: “I think ‘A’ was hoping you might share your reaction to his/her poem... How did you find yourself responding to it?” might be one way to draw out a clearer response.

- Employ visuals based on *real data*

Visual information about a partner and the shared objects that comprise a collaborative activity provides many critical cues for successful collaboration. Visual information impacts situation awareness by providing feedback about the state of a joint task and

facilitates conversational grounding by providing a resource that pairs can use to communicate efficiently. (Gergle, Kraut, and Fussell 36).

Great words don't equal great conversation. Words need support and we can support conversation with great visuals like never before. People have come to appreciate how important it is to include visuals as part of important conversations, but often these visuals fail to engage or impress. Designers can support efforts to capture the data accurately, translate it to reflect the audience, and revise it when it misses the mark. But first we must understand why it is important designers are present long before they are tasked with simply creating a graphic for a presentation; they need to be at the development stages, and participate in strategic conversation about the topic, the data and the audience.

Judi Brownell's HURIER model (figure 1) was developed to recognize the six aspects of listening processes: **h**earing, **u**nderstanding, **r**emembering, **i**nterpreting, **e**valuating and **r**esponding (Brownell 14). While visuals also support other steps along a conversation (such as interpreting), they are crucial in helping us **remember**; in essence, visuals help the data "stick" long after the conversation has ended.

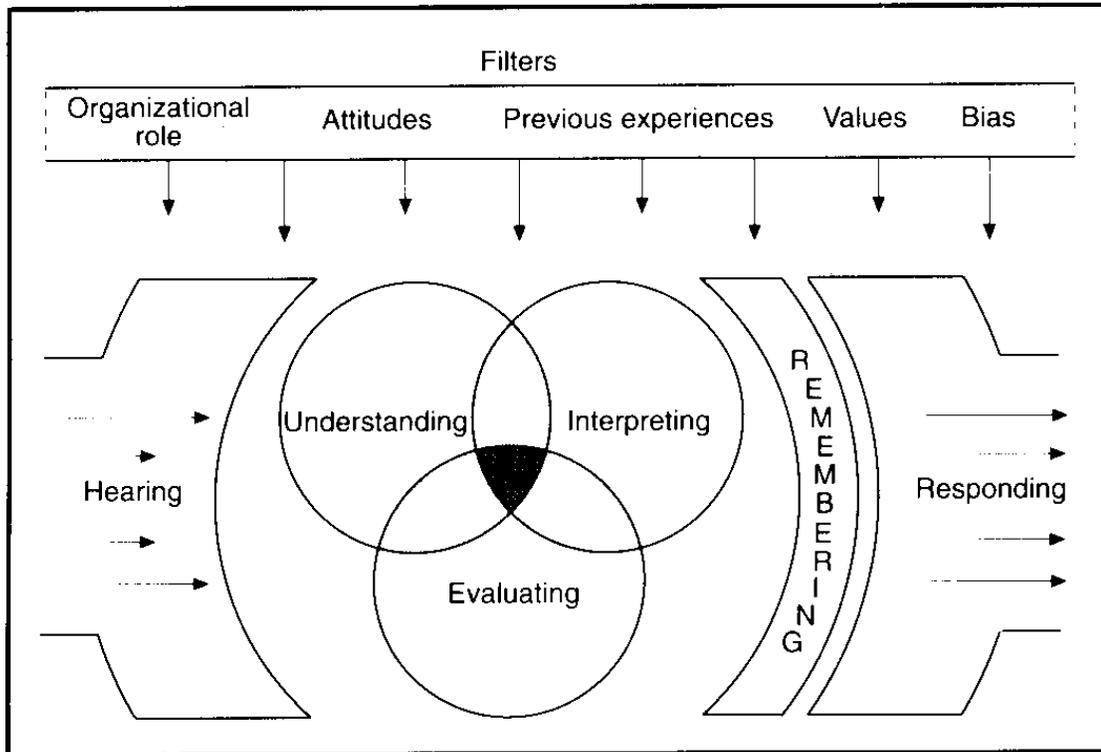


Fig. 1. Title

Malcolm Gladwell discusses the concept of “stickiness” in his book *The Tipping Point* in relation to how visuals were integrated into *Sesame Street* and *Blue’s Clues* programming to connect with audience in new ways: “We all want to believe that the key to making an impact on someone lies with the inherent quality of the ideas we present. But in none of these cases did anyone substantially alter the content of what they were saying. Instead, they tipped the message by tinkering, on the margin, with the presentation of their ideas...” (131). It isn’t just about processing information; remembering it also contributes to how we accurately and appropriately respond. Personas and Mapping are two activities that can visually bring information to life-giving data that essential sticky quality that keeps stakeholders engaged and able to remember unique, specific details. This supports efforts to build understanding around a task, project, problem, strategy or

plan. Though there are plenty of visual tools designers use day to day, we will focus on how *Personas* and *Mapping* can be adapted to keep the human experience at the center of conversational groups.

Personas represent refined segments of people with shared viewpoints, i.e., they are not about one actual stakeholder, but rather a “snapshot of a user archetype” (King).

An example...

An organization wants to understand how employees (users) feel about the current integrated software system. They may investigate their users’ experiences through surveys, focus groups and interviews to find that there are three main user “types,” categorized by their specific set of viewpoints on new software. Personas are created based on the buckets most of the employee responses fell into, named “Retirement Ted,” “Cautious Cathy” and “Savvy Stephen.” Ted is in his late 60s, has been with the company for over ten years, knows the current system inside and out, and, regardless of his tech-savviness, he’s hesitant to adopt any new systems in the timeframe leading up to retirement. “Cathy” is leery of updates and new software and anticipates problems that impact her quick processing speeds. “Stephen” always feels new is better, and has been frustrated with some of the limited tracking capabilities of the current, outdated software.

The personas are printed on large sheets of paper and are taped to the wall surrounding the organization’s management and leadership teams as they converse around investing in new software. *Ted, Cathy, and Stephen* are referred to often as the team discusses benefits, risks, costs, etc. Given the fact that “Retirement Ted” represents a considerable portion of their workforce, they determine the degree business operations would be impacted by new software and frustrated their largest user group. They decide to return to the idea of new software the following year.

The development of personas, in this situation, has also shed light on a glaring gap: their workforce is aging and many will phase into retirement at similar time frames, potentially creating a vacuum with the loss of organizational knowledge and skills. In addition to postponing any new software, the group decides it will form a task force to better understand this newer, more concerning issue pressing the future of the company.

You can see from this (oversimplified) example that creating personas allowed the organization to humanize the users of the software program and resolve it based on a number of factors, especially respecting how it will challenge their employees' experiences. Additionally, the development of personas and the resulting conversation provided a window another, more pressing issue the organization needs to address.

With only minor tweaking, you can see how a designer could adapt the development of personas to be a valuable visual aid for groups having conversations unrelated to the direct “tangible” creation of a product or service. In this example the personas helped the leadership team make an important decision about timing in relation to a large investment in new software. What may have only been an abstract, non-concrete understanding of how employees might feel about it, the personas allowed the group a foundation of understanding first, so that they may begin finding alignment on how best to move forward.

Similar to personas (and frequently going hand in hand) is **mapping**. As my post “[Tools of the Trade](#)” explains, there are a wide variety of maps designers use depending on the type of work they do or the information they need to gain clarity on.

Conversation mapping is a great tool for designers, though not as widely utilized as customer journey maps, service maps or experience maps. In my pop out, we explore how experts use conversation mapping to extract experiences from groups of people.

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THEY SAID IT BETTER

What is conversation mapping?

"It's like everybody in a meeting talking at once, but instead of being a gaggle of noise, we're actually collecting a very rich picture. We start to realize that there are patterns which are embedded - common patterns across multiple disciplines or across multiple perspectives" (McKenzie).

<<<<embed Futureinsightmaps "Conversation Mapping: an overview" >>>>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqWL4k2easU>

Frequently, conversation mapping starts with a "seed," an often stimulating, intriguing statement or question, as Bruce McKenzie from Future Insight Maps explains. This in turn, elicits (and captures) a variety of authentic responses surrounding an issue (McKenzie). "The conversation map itself enables us to identify patterns which we can work with to leverage improvement in that complex issue" (McKenzie).

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B19

4.3 Designing for trust

"The data also suggest that team psychological safety is something beyond interpersonal trust; there was evidence of a coherent interpersonal climate within each group characterized by the absence or presence of a blend of trust, respect for each other's competence, and caring about each other as people" (Edmondson 375).

The research indicates that the best, most successful teams are built within a tapestry of trust, respect, and care. But as I noted in "[Human Needs in Conversation](#)," it isn't always easy to cultivate trust in an environment where there are often brief points of contact between co-workers

and potentially long stretches of time without contact at all. Even the relationships we have with department members we sit near, or even eat lunch with, lack the depth of connection we usually have in our personal lives.

It makes it difficult for designers to design for conversations when team members are not familiar with each other or a negative relationship with trust has already been established. But overcoming this is essential; trust must be established early and quick, and continued to be cultivated throughout any project or task, starting with our most basic workplace conversations.

Below are a few things to consider when designing for the element of trust within effective conversational spaces.

Three Considerations of Designing Conversations to Establish Trust

- Establish the right team leader

We've all heard the phrase: *shit rolls downhill*. This is especially true in group settings, where a team leader's hidden fears, control issues, or indifference can stifle any chance of achieving an authentic degree of trust. If this is a place that the innermost turmoil of the self can show up, then it becomes essential for a team leader to be someone who trusts themselves enough to know that they must trust their team. "If the facilitator does not believe in the group, this comes out in subtle ways... Any group knows when it is being trifled with or dishonoured. The people will never really trust that facilitator again" (The Institute of Cultural Affairs 35).

In the *New York Times Magazine* article, "What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team," one team's engineer recalls his group experience with fondness, telling the researchers how: "his team leader was 'direct and straightforward, which creates a safe space for you to take risks'" (Duhigg). Not surprisingly, that particular team "was among Google's

accomplished groups” (Duhigg). The transparency, sincerity, and openness of a team lead will directly set the tone and support the direction of any group of co-workers—new to each other, or not.

But what can a designer do if the team leader is inexperienced or the choice is beyond their control? Design leadership must step in and play a role in establishing “the right” team leaders. Yet, this is easier said than done; instilling trust is a two-way street and everyone needs to participate.

In “Do You Really Trust Your Team? (And Do They Trust You?),” co-founder and managing partner of Paravis Partners Amy Jen Su acknowledges that understanding why trust is important is often the easy part. Rather, it’s the “what and how parts” that have often been left to “gut feelings... instead of a concrete choice” (Su). Su breaks the *what* and *how* down into two areas to consider in leadership and team building: “trust in performance,” which addresses measuring ‘hard’ execution-based factors needed to establish trust between teams and their leaders, and “trust in principles,” which addresses the ‘soft’ skills that impact “engagement and satisfaction” (Su). Organizations will need to think more holistically about building sustainable trust between teams and their leaders as the marketplace becomes less steady and there arises a higher urgency for adaptive problem solving.

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THEY SAID IT BETTER

Trust as essential ingredient

“We live in a world where organizations, and individuals, ability to adapt and change quickly is absolutely critical. We do that best and most efficiently and effectively in an environment where we trust the people that we’re working with... The ability of design thinking conversations to create trust, both within

teams and between teams, and their important stakeholders, is really critical”
(Liedtka).

<https://www.mural.co/blog/maximizing-the-roi-of-design-thinking-livestream-recap>

(6 minute mark)

If you’ve ever conversed with me, you know I’m a huge Jeanne Liedka fan. I was introduced to her via her book *Design for the Greater Good*, loaned to me from a co-worker at AARP during my practicum. I couldn’t recommend it enough.

One reason I’m a fan of hers is because, though not a designer, she has spent years promoting design thinking methods in business. We (designers) need these advocates within other disciplines, whose education, experiences and goals may be different than our own, but nevertheless, can be great teammates who understand our processes toward innovation.

I know this video is long; but I encourage you to watch the whole thing! Factoring trust (as one component) of measuring design thinking’s ROI is a connection we don’t often consider in business.

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- Embrace the pace

“Be quick, but don’t hurry”

-Legendary basketball coach, John Wooden

If you are attempting to establish trust in a team, it may require you to hit the brakes first. This can be counterintuitive in business settings where the motto is usually ‘time is money’. But allowing a team time and space to share appropriately, to take a satisfactory intermission—a pause—before “digging in” can aid in bringing high moments of empathy and quickly establish the

seeds of trust. In *Do / Pause*, author Robert Poynton writes: “A pause is an opening. It acts as a portal to other options and choices, giving more dimension to your experience” (Poynton pp).

Much like the previous consideration, modeling the importance of “pausing” comes from leadership at the organizational level, but conversation designers are responsible for the day to day implementation. “As a designer of strategic conversations, it’s your job to help nurture the patience that’s required for the group to develop their insights before they start taking action” (Ertel and Soloman 54). Sometimes this pause may give individuals or small groups time to perform tasks related to reflection, or expression, as discussed in the prior post “[designing for common ground](#)”; on the other hand, this pause could give time for shared experiences, or playful interaction. Regardless of the method, a slower pace carves out time for team members to experience vulnerability and align towards a common goal.

Shared experiences, even personal ones, are a compelling way individuals can connect, especially in situations where members are new to each other. “Shared experiences are a powerful tool for managers to build high-performing teams. They help to shape values, norms, and behaviors that allow people to get work done more efficiently and effectively” (Giacoman). Traditionally, organizations have viewed this as “time wasted” but more of today’s businesses are recognizing how, when used appropriately and effectively, these pauses can go a long way to establishing positive group dynamics and substantially increase long term productivity.

During conversation planning stages, designers can account for this need to pause. Depending on the challenge or task, the group, and the desired outcome, designers can anticipate what type of sharing may be conducive to building trust, as well as recognize when a ‘shared experience’ style might not fit, but rather a playful activity, such as improv (discussed later) would better match the groups dynamics.

Designers 'in the trenches' and design leadership must share an interest in carving out time for effective, purposeful pausing, as well as illustrating the positive impact it has on productivity or innovation. This responsibility is never more important than now, as workers and organizations are already keenly aware of how much time is lost to conversation, in the form of meetings, emails and phone calls (see previous post "[Why *design* conversations?](#)").

- Develop the right rapport

"We didn't handle the situation any differently than any other interview, and it served as a testament to our approach - listening, following up..., building rapport and trust bit by bit, until there was a great deal of openness and great information" (Portugal 23).

Oftentimes, organizations find themselves in a position where they would like to know more about their own strengths and weaknesses, blind spots, service hiccups, or employee satisfaction/experiences, etc. The desire to know more may start simply as expressed curiosity between two managers, or it may be a task force charged with providing greater clarity on a specific subject for strategy development. Regardless of the source, many organizations know there can be valuable knowledge extracted directly from within their ranks. But approaching busy employees and asking probing questions might not always be welcomed; it is essential to design these interviews in a way that is respectful, informative, and cultivates, rather than undermines, established trust paradigms.

In *Mapping Experiences*, Jim Kalbach writes: "This type of interview is an art. The challenge is balancing between a nondirected conversation and getting feedback on the specific topics you need to learn about. It's the interviewer's job to drive the conversation, letting go of control at times, and jumping in and steering the session at others" (Kalbach 118). It is best to avoid surveys in these situations; impersonal investigation may cause employees to feel like just a statistic. "The goal is to

explore and learn, not to take a quantitative poll” (Kalbach 112). By being respectful and clear on time and expectations, and allowing the interviewee to feel relaxed, setting the tone as conversational, the organization can really dig deep and discover elements of their operations and employee experiences in ways a survey never could. But unless there is true, authentic trust, little knowledge will be gained.

Designers can have a significant impact here even if they are not the interviewer. In pre-interview stages, designers can shift focus back to individual experience, ensuring considerations are made in areas such as the location or the length of the interview, time of day or the tone of the questions. They may also provide support by identifying optimal individuals to interview within the organization and developing a well thought out discussion guide. Designers can harness their understanding of experience to ensure the interview feels like a great conversation, where there is great potential for deeper insights after developing genuine rapport. Post-interview, designers can support efforts to synthesize the data and identify themes as well as determine where great visuals are needed, such as personas and maps, which can be used for conversations down the line.

Designing for Active Listening

In *The Art of Focused Conversation*, a wonderful Edna St. Vincent Millay poem excerpt is shared:

“Upon this gifted stage, in its dark hour
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower
Of facts . . . they lie unquestioned, uncombined,
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
Is daily spun, but there exists no loom
To weave it into fabric”

(Millay, *qtd in The Art of Focused Conversation* 107).

In this poem, she ponders who is there to “weave” the overwhelming amount of facts from a state of “uncombined” droplets into “fabric,” essentially asking who is going to mould this fragmented bit of unrelated information into something useful or usable? This was written around 1939 so you can imagine how she might feel about the barrage of information we have in 2020.

Today we are in ‘information overload.’ Between 24-hour news programs, social media, emails, texts, household responsibilities, sick parents, and our children’s schools, our brains are exhausted and we are finding it difficult to focus. Neuropsychologist Dr. Kenneth Freundlich writes: “Being constantly bombarded with far more information than we can process works to the detriment of our memory, our concentration and ultimately our ability to produce timely results and make good decisions” (Freundlich *qtd. in Information Overload*).

Humans are natural pattern-seekers; our brains are constantly in a state of comparing, processing, connecting, and prioritizing information, and it's difficult to turn it off. As a result, we come to workplace settings (meetings, presentations, etc) distracted and lacking an ability to focus. As I discussed in my previous post “[Human Needs in Conversation](#),” humans are finding it hard to listen *at all*, much less *actively* or *aggressively* listen, engage, remember, or respond thoughtfully.

When designers are planning for conversations, there are two sides to balance while considering the act of listening: the TALKER, and the HEARER.

If the narrative is a snore-fest, we can’t expect it will engage distracted, overloaded brains. But we also need those brains to respectfully turn their attention to the moment, turn off their personal distractions, and focus. Thus, I’ve developed two tenets to achieve active listening, one focused on the TALKER and one focused on the HEARER.

Two Considerations of Designing Conversations to Achieve Active Listening

- [Talkers: tell better stories.](#)

"In *Made to Stick*, authors Chip and Dan Heath give numerous examples of stories that cling to our brains like burrs on a Corgi... What gives them their Velcro-like adhesion? According to the authors, it's because they're 1) Simple, 2) unexpected, 3) concrete, 4) credible, and 5) emotional. When you apply these five principles to stories that align with your key messages, you deepen the emotional bond..." (Neumeier 92).

Not unlike the "sticky" visuals we discussed in my previous post "[Designing for... common ground & understanding](#)," good stories can adhere to our brains and catch us up in their nets. "Using principal storytelling elements will boost the impact of your message dramatically and prevent you and your audience from drowning in an ever-rising sea of information" (Choy 66). But crafting a story is difficult, an art. Many of us have had no formal training on story development. Luckily there are a plethora of training sessions, videos and books out there to help us craft engaging and powerful stories with our data within work contexts. It takes practice, but most people are able to elevate their ability to tell stories, even with data.

For designers, one tool we can use to craft engaging narratives in conversations is storyboarding. Not unlike wireframing, a method frequently used by web designers and developers, a storyboard is a "visual depiction of the scenes, dialog, action in a sequential order. It is a method used to mock up ideas, designs and concepts..." (UX Design). Similar to the way we might practice an anticipated conversation in our minds (or sometimes out loud), a storyboard can aid designers in crafting anticipated conversations by mapping out *who* will be in the room, *what* subject matter will be presented, *when* certain visuals will be needed, and *how* certain information may be perceived. If there is anyone invested in the success of a conversation, from a direct manager to the CEO, a

storyboard acting as a conversation “prototype” could aid in establishing buy-in from senior leadership about the conversation’s purpose and objectives (Laurel 205).

- Listeners: turn off your tech

“Go into any meeting in any company, and you’ll see the same thing: people surreptitiously checking their devices while checking out of the conversation that’s happening right in front of them. I will readily admit that this behavior goes on my Most Annoying List, made even more relevant by the amount of work I do with groups” (Hedges).

It is common to see our co-workers “multitasking” right next to us in meetings, during presentations, sometimes in the middle of our one and one conversations. One study “found that when people switch back and forth between tasks, they lose up to 50% of their efficiency and accuracy” (Hedges).

So yes, simply put , it's frustrating. But it also significantly hinders our ability as communicators to meet all four of the human conversational needs: distraction undermines our ability to understand concepts and form common ground, it restricts our sense of safe sharing and trust building, prohibits us from connecting to any especially important narrative happening in the room (above), and detaches us from bonds forming during time of playfulness and humor.

The designer’s role in these situations is not always clear. During storyboarding and planning, designers need to consider the role technology will have on the conversation and advocate for its limited use, yet, it may be difficult to enforce. Kristi Hedges, a leadership development consultant, suggests establishing ground rules beforehand, such as requiring devices be turned off or muted until a predetermined tech-break. “...If they are kind enough to put their phones away, then you can do your part by honoring breaks for them to check in... give participants a clear break

time with a set beginning and end. People are more likely to unplug when they can plan for when to plug back in" (Hedges).

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LET'S GET WEIRD

An Anti-PowerPoint manifesto

"I know it's mundane, but do people ever *get together* - and if they get together do they do something other than watch stupid PowerPoints together? ...Why would you bring people together—which is a big undertaking—and not use the time for real learning?" (Senge).

You might think it's crazy for me, a tried and true visual communicator, to say this... but here goes: let's ban PowerPoints.

"Death by PowerPoint" has become an actual phrase in today's working landscape due to the prevalence of over bulleted, often text-heavy slides, with cliched stock photos of handshakes, puzzle pieces, or gears sprinkled in (<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-35038429>). Jeff Bezos has even famously banned PowerPoint presentations in executive meetings at Amazon, opting instead for a shared reading of a "Narrative Memo" before beginning any discussion on a topic. (<https://www.inc.com/carmine-gallo/jeff-bezos-bans-powerpoint-in-meetings-his-replacement-is-brilliant.html>)

LET'S JUST ALL AGREE TO BAN... any PowerPoint deck over 10 slides. All graphics of gears or puzzle pieces or well-tailored white people shaking hands. There should be no spreadsheets copied and pasted directly from Excel. There should be no bulleted lists with paragraph after paragraph of text.

And you should never, NEVER just read directly from your slide.

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4.5 Designing for Humor & Play

“And research suggests that the upsides of play extend beyond the individual. Teams of workers can benefit from play via increased trust, bonding and social interaction, sense of solidarity, and a decreased sense of hierarchy. Furthermore, findings suggest that play at work can benefit whole organizations by creating a friendlier work atmosphere, higher employee commitment to work, more flexible organization-wide decision making, and increased organizational creativity” (Playing Up...).

Can I just ask... what organization out there *wouldn't want these benefits??*

As we discussed previously in “Forces Undermining Conversation,” internal fears, complicated personality types and distorted leadership styles can obstruct any positive momentum an organization has when trying to open the lines of communication and design for more effective and engaging conversations. Labeling these possible underminers isn't about *judgement*; it is about *diagnostics*. As we design for conversations, we can consider the paths of behavior that are well worn, like the analogy to the Grand Canyon from “Identity forms Culture”—what are the ‘comfortable’ paths our conversationalists may naturally take? If there is an engrained “superhero” dynamic, for example, we must be able to plan for group dynamics where members are more naturally inclined to agree. We can design for activities that challenge this propensity and be on the lookout for verbal and nonverbal cues that may indicate agreement isn't actually shared. Perhaps we know a group tasked with envisioning a new product has a dominator amongst its ranks... Designing for this conversation may look a little different than designing a conversation for a group featuring a notorious ‘Yabut’.

Once established patterns of engagement are identified—in both positive and negative categories—designers' role is one of challenging those patterns of behavior. How can we get a dominator to become a collaborator? How can we give confidence to a meeker member? How can we avoid the pitfalls of an overly agreeable group?

Getting people out of their comfort zone is a delicate and nuanced art that considers many factors, some of which I explored in "[Designing for... trust](#)," and "[Designing for... active listening](#)," but the mindset designers seek most in play is *openness*. It is through humor and playfulness that designers can encourage conversationalists to shed their established 'skin' and feel safe stepping into a new role.

As a reminder, I wanted to refrain from this research becoming a field guide or 'how to' - in other words, this section isn't about suggesting games or playful activities to engage your team in. There are plenty of books and articles on the web for you to find inspiration. Try some out - see where they take your team. If you're interested in knowing a little more about the research behind playfulness in work environments, check out the 2018 article "[Play at Work: An Integrative Review and Agenda for Future Research](#)." It provides a great synthesis of current research as well as identifies how we can explore the topic further.

TWO CONSIDERATIONS OF DESIGNING CONVERSATIONS

TO CREATE PLAYFUL ENVIRONMENTS

- [Preach parallel thinking](#)

"We have developed many excellent thinking tools for argument and analysis. Our information technology methods are constantly improving. But we have developed few tools to deal with our ordinary everyday thinking-the sort of thinking we do in conversations and meetings" (The de Bono Group).

Our educational experiences encourage the seeking of truth. For truth, we want data, hard facts, evidence; we expect the “law of the land” and count on argument to get us there. We are taught that, living opposite of truth, is *untruth*. Here lies falsities, distortions, and misrepresentations of facts and we should navigate through these waters with an expectation of deceit.

But the reality of our existence is somewhat different. Our day to day lives are not so clear cut. Oftentimes we are dealing with conversation offenders, where uncovering exact information can be elusive, or wicked problems, where various truths may technically be correct, but are fraught with unintended consequences, and arguing between two narrow possibilities misses an opportunity to discuss better, broader ideas.

“Our egos are often so hell-bent on getting our own ideas out that we can hardly wait for others to finish talking. What others are saying becomes a terrible interruption in what we are trying to say. In the process, we not only fail to understand what others are saying; we do not even hear them out” (The Institute of Cultural Affairs 9).

In an effort to more accurately capture the nuances of our actual world, Maltese physician, psychologist, and author Edward de Bono developed the concept of *parallel thinking*. This process, considered an alternative approach to more adversarial, fixed thinking problem solving methods, requires a “thinker” to put “forward his or her thoughts in parallel with the thoughts of others - not attacking the thoughts of others” (The de Bono Group). In effect, rather than dismissing other viewpoints and experiences outright, we collect truths like tokens in our mind, allowing equal space for any shared experience or knowledge to coexist alongside our own as equal truths.

This is not a natural state of thinking for most of us. A conversation designer, often acting in the role of facilitator, can nurture this approach in group settings by explaining it, circling back to it

when necessary, and through role playing activities, such as “Six Thinking Hats” (see pop out section *Down the Rabbit Hole*), that encourage people to embrace it.

- Harness the power of facilitation

“...with the high stakes and impatience typical in today's marketplace, the fear of failure is widespread, with sometimes unpredictable and sometimes unintended consequences for interpersonal dynamics, company operations, strategy, creativity, and innovation” (Yorton 7).

If you return to my post “Tools of the Trade,” you will find the section on facilitation explored its relationship to creativity. Conversation designers can use the magic of play to coax the creativity out of the most leery teammates, if used authentically. If not an ingrained approach within the organization, research indicates that this can do more harm than good, especially when employees view the *requirement* of play as “manufactured” and “insincere” (Petelczyc et al. 181).

Many times, the root of this leerness to participate is fear - fear of humiliation, fear of public speaking, fear of ‘letting go’ or being seen as anything but serious to subordinates. Anticipating this resistance, and planning ways to entice everyone to participate is an artform. Tom Yorton, of the famous The Second City, suggests improv as a way to stare down fear and tap into the collective openness needed to create really great ideas. Improv, he touts, can help individuals get more comfortable with failure. The reward for such a risk: organizations “improve productivity, become more innovative, and dramatically increase employee job satisfaction” (7).

Actor Alan Alda has been preaching the benefits of improv for years. This video from 2009, led by Alda, discusses some of the ways this playful activity has helped scientists connect to each other, with the goal to become better communicators.

Conversation designers need not be improv aficionados to plan for a small improv session at the start of a strategy meeting that needs its participants to be open minded, unhindered to their positions or titles, and starting with a positive mindset. In this role, designers can aid in both designing the meeting, and then, acting as facilitators - guiding team members through a creative process, by knowing what each member needs depending on their level of creativity (doing, adapting, making, or creating) beforehand, and planning the nuances that can make the effort a success and goal oriented, rather than haphazardly thrown together.

5.1 Defining Metrics, Creating Value

“I want to talk about maximizing the ROI of design thinking, which you might think would take us immediately to talking about financial measures But it doesn't -- because what our research tells us is that maximizing the value of design thinking is really about understanding its social technology, and in particular, understanding how it shapes those of us who use it in the process of helping us shape designs for the people we're using it for” (Liedtka).

In my post [“Why Design Conversations,”](#) I quoted Ben Sheppard, McKinsey, and Company's Product Development and Design lead: “What the CDO [Chief Design Officer] is accountable for is less clear” (Sheppard). Let's dissect this a bit further.

While other leadership positions have direct responsibility, measurements, and links to the “bottom line,” design leaders often operate on the outskirts of such tangible rewards. When others are not clear on *what it is you do exactly*, it's hard to determine the correct parameters with which to measure performance. This is true of design on the whole, it will remain true within the realm of designing conversations.

Throughout this journey, I've detailed many considerations for which conversation designers can have positive influence: from embracing tension and discomfort, challenging mitigated speech patterns and developing visuals that help data stick (B18), to setting a pace that allows time to develop important moments of connection (B19), acting as curators for engaging narratives while creating an atmosphere that allows for deeper degrees of listening (B20), and finally, to act as a facilitator—regardless of formal designation—encouraging open mindedness with a playful mindset (B21).

Conversation designers need to be responsible for their results and understanding how their work impacts their organization. Businesses often want to look at the bottom line. While you can start there (and we will), simply focusing on this one aspect may often lead to inconclusive information. If design happens “in the trenches” - so does its worth. This means going beyond “bottom line” calculations is essential; businesses and designers must be able to demonstrate the value in designing conversations to show -- as Jeanne Liedtka says -- the ways it shapes those doing the shaping.

DESIGN ON THE BOTTOM LINE

“We’re not the first to ask: how can you confidently prove the business value of good design? Sure, there are workarounds that uncover pieces of the puzzle, like A/B tests that show increases in conversion rates or user research that validate design choices. But, the bigger picture—financial results—always seem to be missing” (Esposito).

When you focus solely on design’s impacts on the bottom line, that’s where design stays: on the bottom. As a former accountant, I know firsthand how a company’s senior leadership often speaks in terms of “balance sheets” and “gross revenue.” This can alienate those educated or

experienced in shaping products and services for human beings. This need to understand the *business side* has resulted in many of the MBA/MA programs you may have seen pop up over the last few years.

I may be a designer now, but I haven't lost touch with my accountant roots. If your audience is a group of "bean counters," (said with love, of course!) a presentation of design's benefits needs to focus on a direct return on investment, in the dollar sense of it. Perhaps you are trying to gain buy in from a board of directors or asking for budget allowances from a strategy team; in many of these cases, illustrating the warm fuzzies of co-creation teams can be a hard sell.

Luckily for designers today, there is a mountain of research available to make a case for the bottom line benefits of design, whether you're making a case for design thinking on the whole, or for an investment in designing conversations. The two I'm going to mention are the McKinsey's "The business value of design" and Forrester's "The Total Economic Impact of IBM's Design Thinking Practice," both from 2018.

The McKinsey Report is a wide view perspective, which "tracked the design practices of 300 publicly listed companies over a five-year period in multiple countries and industries," surveying senior executives, collecting financial data, and performing an advanced regression analysis, which ultimately allowed them to group organizational actions into the "four themes of good design" (Sheppard et. al).

The Forrester / IBM Report is a more drilled down perspective: focusing solely on individual projects within IBM to understand the "benefits, costs, and risks associated with this investment" in design thinking. To perform this feat, Forrester "interviewed four of IBM's Design Thinking clients and surveyed an additional 60 executives who have employed design thinking at their organizations" and found that partnering with IBM's Design Thinking

practice addressed challenges to “enhance culture, speed, efficiency, customer experience, and profitability” (Forrester Total Economic Impact Study).

The results from both of these reports are way too comprehensive for me to adequately give them justice briefly here, however, both provide different ways to evaluate design thinking’s potential financial impact, or even as a way to justify investment decisions to risk averse stakeholders. Designers can refer to this research and find the right approach for their specific needs and audience, to make a wide variety of cases for investing, measuring, and tracking in design thinking and conversation design.

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DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

SERVQUAL: One early attempt to qualify value

“Intensifying competition and rapid deregulation have led many service and retail businesses to seek profitable ways to differentiate themselves. One strategy... is the delivery of high service quality.

Delivering superior service quality appears to be a prerequisite for success, if not survival, of such businesses in the 1980s and beyond”

(Parasuraman& Zeithaml 12-13).

The difficulty in measuring experience and perceptions, such as service quality, is not a new topic. The quote above, from “SERVQUAL: A Multiple-Item Scale for Measuring Consumer Perceptions of Service Quality,” published in 1988, illustrates how these topics were already being researched some 30 years ago.

SERVQUAL was a 22-item instrument used to assess perceptions of service quality and illustrates the desire to form meaningful ways to capture abstract feelings. Whereas

goods quality could be “measured objectively by such indicators as durability and number of defects” there was no way, at the time, to objectively assess “consumers’ perceptions of quality” (Parasuraman & Zeithaml 13). SERVQUAL was one way organizations were attempting to identify potential gaps, which in turn would allow them to design better services and differentiate them in the marketplace.

Reading through the guidelines for SERVQUAL’s application, one can easily see why it isn’t a popular method of discovery today. It is a complicated tool at best, and criticism as early as the 1990s questioned the validity of its results (Polyakova and Mohammed 65-66).

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Pulling Design’s Value Out of the Weeds

When you talk about value, you’re not always talking directly about making money (profit) or spending money (cost), but often business leaders want to understand how \$1 invested would return \$2. While this may work great for products and services (for example, it costs \$5 to make a toy and you sell it for \$30) it is more difficult to measure what I call the “leaky window” effect.

To extend this metaphor, the leaky window is often out of sight or someone else’s problem but it causes significant waste. Oftentimes dealing with a product or service issue is a more ‘comfortable’ problem: perhaps it requires a new part manufacturer, or a better tracking software. In essence, it doesn’t require your organization to take a ‘cold hard look in the mirror’ and have difficult conversations around hard truths.

In my post [“Designing for ... understanding/common ground.”](#) I discussed an example of this, where the development of personas allowed one company to realize the extent to which a totally unrelated, but much more significant, problem was bubbling beneath the surface while they were busy addressing the need for new software. Design, when used effectively, can be a gateway to discovery of these hidden, out of sight (or out of mind) glitches that can disable an otherwise

healthy, functioning organization. Harnessing the power of effective conversation can help a company navigate its way through the various difficult, tense, illuminating rapids of self-discovery, and ultimately, find a way to fix a solvable problem, or develop an acceptable solution to it.

But Leaky Windows come in a variety of forms. Below, I want to discuss a few categories where conversation can support the effective use of design tools, methods, and processes to address the murky value design brings to the table.

- Design for Time

Circling back to the beginning, in one of my original posts "[Why *design* conversations?](#)" you can see the topic of *conversational bloat* was a significant factor in why I felt the concept of designing conversation merits further research and ultimately... a more active community of advocates. The cost to US business alone is staggering, the impact on morale is devastating. When organizations don't connect time with value, everyone loses. The phrase "Time is money" needs to be phased out; we're ready for "Time is *everything*." Time needs to be considered a resource—no different than software, or people, or information might be.

In *Moments of Impact*, authors Chris Ertel and Lisa Kay Soloman discuss how Toyota Financial Services (TFS) dealt with frustration surrounding how much wasted time was spent in unproductive meetings. "One of the improvements they came up with was a simple, one-page form for requesting time with senior leaders" (39) Ertel and Soloman write. Meeting-seekers were required to select just *one* reason for the request: *FYI*, *Input* (i.e., requests for guidance and feedback), and *Decision*, which "forced presenters to be clearer in their requests and helped firm leaders to know what was expected of them in each interaction. Meetings with TFS executives got a lot more focused and productive" (Ertel and Soloman 40.)

This "answer" isn't one size fits all; not every company would benefit from such a form. What we can take from this example is that there are ways to reconfigure and reimagine effective

solutions to deal with conversational bloat, even with very small changes like this example illustrates.

Additionally, our world continues to focus on hyper efficiency and cost cutting, and many workers are left with “too many responsibilities and too little time to reflect” (Ertel and Soloman 51). As I discussed in “Designing for... trust” the research demonstrates the value and efficiency of teams given time to reflect.

Disorganized, purposeless, and a lack of respect for time has wrapped itself like tentacles throughout organizations, not only impacting the bottom line, but also squeezing life out of morale and effectiveness. It has become the Leaky Window of our generation. Design leadership should be responsible for the management of an organization’s time and not from a ‘billable hours’ focus. Conversation designers can support this “in the trenches” by ensuring everyone’s time feels valuable, by using design’s processes, tools and methods to strategize and design solutions for each organization’s unique environments.

- Design for employee retention.

“Since 2010, costs associated with voluntary employee turnover have nearly doubled from \$331 billion to \$617 billion... With these kinds of costs, it is puzzling that CEOs, CFOs, COOs and CHROs are not escalating employee retention to a top priority” (Work Institute 9).

We’ve all worked for companies where one department in particular has high turnover. High turnover can often be a sign of a Leaky Window. The Work Institute’s 2019 Retention Report writes that for “each employee you lose, it will cost you up to 33% of their annual salary to replace them” (tinypulse.com). So while it is difficult to capture the exact dollar impact of the turnover, companies often move forward with hiring, training and investing in a new employee, unaware (or avoiding) of the high price they are paying for the issue. Maybe there are no customer complaints, maybe it has

very little impact on sales, and so senior leadership fails to adequately comprehend how much money is being siphoned out right under their nose, and the domino effect it can have on organizational identity, interpersonal relationships, job performance and job satisfaction go largely unnoticed.

It is time to converse around what is causing the high turnover, and it isn't always easy. The Work Institute identified four preventable reasons cited as reasons for the departure: Job Characteristics, Work Environment, Career Development, Work-life Balance (The Work Institute). Many of these can become that "cold hard look in the mirror" companies are trying to avoid. Perhaps your company doesn't fit into any of these categories... but it would be worthwhile for every company experiencing retention issues to discover the root of the problem. Design—in conversation, visuals, strategy, team development, and products and services—can all be tapped into to support these efforts.

Improving retention rates is another possible way we can measure design's positive impact on business.

- Design for diversity

Okay, we get it—today there is no shortage of media telling us how important diversity is. But often we get caught up in achieving just one category of diversity and forget that, in business, there are many types of diversity to consider when building "the right" team.

In *Moments of Impact*, authors Ertel and Soloman list 3 categories of diversity that are important to consider:

Table X. Table Title

Organizational diversity	-Professional role and area of expertise -Level of seniority
--------------------------	---

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Organizational unit affiliation -Geographic affiliation (regional and local) -Stakeholder type
Social diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Gender -Age and generation -Race and ethnicity -Culture and language
Psychological diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Personality Types -Learning styles and “intelligence” -Religious, political, and other value systems -Personal motivations and “currencies”

A number of years ago, I completed my practicum by working for AARP in Washington DC over the summer. During that time, I participated in many strategy sessions and witnessed first hand how hard the organization worked to achieve diversity at all three of the levels within these meetings. Just this past month, they were awarded the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award by the U.S. Department of Commerce, illustrating the extent to which the company continues to commit to this (and other) important values.

We often get caught up in “social diversity” and, while this is an equally essential area to consider, if AARP had *only* considered social diversity in those strategy planning sessions, there would have been much left on the table. They also considered organizational diversity; regional perspectives were included as well as various department leadership, as well as psychological. There were a multitude of motivations, learning styles, and intelligences present (as one example, there

was always someone with over ten years working for AARP, who brought a vast institutional knowledge and stopped us newbies from repeating costly mistakes without knowing). Designers can help consider these various categories of diversity when designing the right team.

Another example of where designers can really support diversity can be during team building based on personality. In my post "[Conversational Offenders](#)," it can be helpful to identifying personality types that restrict the flow of novel ideas, limit psychological safety and prohibit turn taking (which has proven to be essential in creating successful teams per this New York Times Magazine article titled "[What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team](#)"). Going beyond this, some companies have found success using various types of personality testing to aid them in team building (as well as recruiting, retention, etc.) Some are based on traditional Myers Briggs research, such as this one offered by [Truity.com](#) -- while others are opting for quicker, visual based tests like this one from [Traitify.com](#). This assessment tool from [DiSC](#) is designed more for personal assessment, helping individuals raise self-awareness to encourage better working relationships.

Whatever the approach, designers can add significant value to ensuring teams have a wide variety of diverse personality types so no one type dominates the conversation. After teams have been built, conversation designers can provide support by training on effective co-creation tactics, mediate through difficult 'show-shopping' misunderstandings, encourage openness and trust, facilitate effective design thinking initiatives, and ensure time is made, where necessary, for playfulness or reflection.

There are many more ways to reimagine how designers can bring value to our organizations, so I could go on indefinitely. Here is the take-away: We are used to seeing designers in spaces where a product or service is being developed—from the beginning, discovery phases, through

implementation and testing. Perhaps, we need to broaden our definition of what constitutes a product or a service?

What if an organization's time was seen as a product? Or effective team building a service? How might we approach the development of either, applying the same traditional lens we might view a new app or a brochure, asking similar questions: Is it effective? How are people responding to it? How can we make it better? ***What if?***

If measuring design doesn't fit in a neat little box using metrics from other disciplines (like Marketing, or Finance) then we need to find other solutions to illustrate the value design provides. Sometimes, if the data is manipulated enough, you can draw direct lines to the bottom line. This might be essential to some situations and audiences - and the research is now available to help with this task. However, there are other ways to track successes (and failures!) of design's impact on an organization. Conversation designers need to be aware of how their work can be measured, and be responsible for ensuring that their projects go successfully.

Systems and Designing Conversation

"What we urgently need is a social technology that allows us to deal with the diverse kind of wicked challenges we've got today... And it has to be more than simple rules like turn-taking. It has to be an entire approach that lets us harness whatever it takes for human beings to have better conversations that allow them to work together to produce better outcomes" (Liedka).

We have reached the end (for now). As we button this up, I wanted to step back from the trenches, and consider conversation design (and design itself) from a broader perspective.

As discussed in my earlier post "[Twenty Years in Design](#)," we've reached new heights with where design shows up, but with this comes new responsibilities and a new awareness of how

design can impact the world in a negative way. **Wicked** problems are here to stay; they question our very future and ask us to adapt in ways we are not accustomed to. Designers trained in understanding the nuances of the way we communicate can help mediate through this uncertainty, supporting groups who need to speak more directly with each other, creating open and safe environments for the best, most novel and feasible ideas to crawl up to the surface.

This cannot happen in a bubble. As Milan Guenther writes in *Intersection*: "In every project or program we are involved in, we find elements that don't fit together, and conditions that prevent good relationships from developing. When relationships fail, it is rarely a single issue that can be blamed. It is the interplay of all the parts which, together with the circumstances at hand, lead to a complex picture of problems and shortcomings" (448). This means that designing better, more thoughtful, more purposeful conversation may be extremely valuable to a single team or single product development initiative, but unless we want it to have real impact, real value to business and our communities at large, we need to start thinking BIGGER. We need to go beyond a focus on human-to-human interactions, to how formed communities of humans interact. We need to look at systems of humans, communities, and nations, factoring in all the social, biological, and technological influences.

But where do we start? How can we turn conversation design from a one-off project into our default style of operation, a standard team approach, an organization's mindset? How can we influence the people around us to think more holistically?

One way is to start small. Start local. And the localist place is you. If you don't think it's possible, I will share my own journey as a way to illustrate that it is:

With an undergraduate degree in English, a ten-year career as an accountant and an [almost] graduate degree in the arts, I would say I qualify as a right brain AND left brain thinker. You might think that is very unique, but my research for this thesis has only shown me how many of us

there are. Additionally, I wasn't born this way. My varied choices in education as well as influencing family, teachers, bosses, and organizations have all guided my path to this point, lighting up new areas of thought along the way.

This means that, as you read this, you might not consider yourself a whole brain, holistic thinker, but you can be. I thought this could be a great place for me to add a few pointers to help you get started...

1. Always start with 'why'

This one, to me, is the essence not only of holistic design, but holistic thinkers across disciplines and fields. As an accountant, long before design school, my obsession with *why* made a monotonous job more exciting and people-centered, and opened the doors to quality control projects. I now consider this to be the early stepping stones to my interest in designing better processes for people.

For designers, this may mean challenging what you or your client *knows* from the very beginning of a project - starting with the design brief. In Yves Behar's *7 Principles of Holistic Product Design* (from his speech at the 2011 Opportunity Green Conference), he begins with: "Start with questions, not answers -- Instead of trying to design a product from a detailed client brief that dictates the answers, the design process should start with a few simple questions" (Scharwarth).

Asking why is a simple way to start opening up the lines of communication between designers and their clients, teams and departments.

2. Find the 'golden ratio'

This term, stolen from mathematics surrounding the spiral pattern we so frequently encounter in nature, is about finding patterns and understanding the root of how they happen. This consideration is, of course, metaphorical in nature. Though we often forget, we human beings are

biological - as part of this, we seek patterns, we participate in them (often without knowing), we learn about the new based on what we already know about the old.

Designers, whether or not they are focusing specifically on conversation, should imagine themselves walking that spiral, starting in the center and moving outwards. What begins as a tightly wound and confusing cross section of opinions, knowledge, data, and parameters can begin to unwind and open as we weave through it all, connecting things along the way. Thinking like this can help us journey from a single problem to the full ecology of interacting elements that surround it. Holistic design requires this mindset.

Designing more thoughtful and purposeful conversation can be a key to unlocking each next stage in that journey.

3. Be disagreeable

Yep, you read that right! Find the (appropriate time) to be disagreeable, a thorn in someone's side! Pick your battles wisely. Sometimes it is best to accept defeat when you've exhausted your possibilities, or you risk losing your job. Not all people are open and willing to hear you out, toss around your idea, or listen to you soapbox about things you know nothing about (even though you probably know more than they assume). We've all been there, and sometimes you just... gotta wait your turn.

In his 2016 Ted Talk, organizational psychologist Adam Grant talks about the underappreciated presence of disagreeableness in the workplace: "I always assumed that agreeable people were 'givers' and disagreeable people were 'takers' but then I gathered the data and I was stunned to find no correlation between those traits... there are disagreeable 'givers' in our organizations; they are people who are gruff and tough on the surface but underneath, have other's best interests at heart... Disagreeable givers are the most undervalued people in our organization

because they're the ones who give the critical feedback that no one wants to hear but everyone needs to hear" (Grant).

In any personality test I've ever taken, I almost always score high in 'agreeableness' and while this is overwhelmingly true, if you know me personally, you also know I have a very strong 'disagreeable' streak. Overall, this quality has served me well throughout my career - it has helped me stand up for myself and others, for doing what's right or ethical, for challenging blind spots that my leadership was missing, among other reasons. I'm still working on laying down my sword when something feels off, so I too, am still very much a work in progress.

To be a holistic thinker, you need to get comfortable with your disagreeable streak, if you aren't already. Embrace it, nurture it, but also recognize when it needs to be put to bed. When used effectively, this quality is what allows designers of all niches to challenge accepted norms, to reframe 'truths', to disrupt the same ol', same ol' encountered day to day.

4. Be bold.

Sometimes being disagreeable is being bold. But here, I'm talking about pushing the boundaries of your position. Perhaps your organization has no design forward mindset; perhaps you are a lone individual, hoping to inspire others or insert some elements of design thinking in your team or department. The hill may seem impossible to climb but it isn't always. There are little ways you can start to influence those around you, and sometimes you can look outside your niche or company for inspiration.

When service designers Megan Miller and Erik Flowers started PracticalServiceDesign.com, they had no idea how many people would contact them asking for advice on how to implement design activities (in this instance service design related) within traditional, top-down, zero design-oriented organizations.

In the video “How to make Service Design work with no money, time or support,” Flowers says: “Every day every day we get some sort of ...communication from people who are working from the ground up in companies: ‘hey I’m one person... at a huge cell phone company, this place couldn’t be less design oriented ... no one’s going to give me any money, I’m not going to be able to hire anybody - how does one person bring service design?’ - our audience is more of the lone practitioner ... who see it from the bottom up and not the top down” (Flowers). Their answer is about making service design practical, to show how it can be effective and to open people’s eyes by showcasing what benefits there are when used effectively. Eventually, there are managers who buy in; it can spread from there.

Of course that is not a one-size-fits-all situation, but there are many more examples out there to find inspiration for boldness. In *Interviewing Users*, author Steve Portigal writes: “You should position yourself in your organization so that interviewing customers is an integral part of how you work. If this wasn’t part of your arrangement upon being hired, you need to evolve your brand with your managers and colleagues” (142). In this example, it’s about positioning yourself closer to the action you seek, even if your position didn’t originally start off this way. Being bold may be asking for additional responsibilities in your current role.

If you want to expand your application of design, if you see blind spots or opportunities others don’t (or are too busy to give time to), put yourself out there. Go further in your position, add value to your deliverables. If you aren’t sure where to start—start Googling. Seeing how other designers brought fresh, new ideas to the table in other organizations could be a great way for lone, holistic designers to have a larger impact.

If I still haven’t convinced you, watch this video [*Systems-thinking: A Little Film About a Big Idea.*](#) It may show you that you are already a systems thinker, you just don’t know it yet!



A Resource Site

a guidebook and resource center for designers shaping conversations around our future's most important topics

Filter by Section:

- Section I
- Section II
- Section III
- Section IV
- Section V

Filter by Content:

- Identity
- Common Ground
- Listening
- Playfulness
- Trust
- Design History
- Organization
- Self
- Group
- Advocate



Get Started Here...

Welcome to *Design the Conversation*.

Click here to begin the journey through this topic, including a little about me, as well as what to expect and how to explore this site.





[GO BACK: The Journey Here](#)

SECTION I

[UP NEXT: Why Design Conversation](#)

identity

What is Conversation Design?

“Conversation Design is the process of designing a natural, two-way interaction between a user and a system (via voice or text) based on the principles of human to human conversation” (Aslet).

The quote above remains one of my favorite—a short, simple way to define it. But therein lies the problem... it's *too* simple. You can trust me when I say that I've spent much of the last year of my life reading about conversation, design, and how best to marry these two concepts together in a way that is approachable, down to earth, yet still based on the latest research. The term “conversation design” has been somewhat hijacked by the AI community, when it should, in fact, continue to include old-school, person-to-person, conversation design as well.

I declare a rewrite!

Conversation Design is the process of designing a natural, two-way interaction between two people, within a group of people, or between a user and a system (via voice or text) based on the principles of human-to-human conversation.”



Yet we should be taking our workplace conversations to the next level. They should be *strategic* and *focused*. Achieving this requires a synthesis of styles, a balance between the arts and sciences. It requires trust, the skills of facilitation, support with great visuals, thoughtful, persuasive storytelling, all mixed with the knowledge of what connects human beings, and what we know makes us feel heard and seen.

Conversations should be viewed in the same light as any product or service—the outcome of thoughtful consideration of all the elements long before we enter the room, and then, measured and tracked for success. Designers are prepared to do this kind of work. They are already accustomed to applying methods to understand and capture experience, and can use many honed skills, tools, and methods to aid organizations attempting to achieve better conversation.

Designing for Trust

The research indicates that the best, most successful teams are built within a tapestry of trust, respect, and care. But as I noted in "Human Needs in Conversation," it isn't always easy to cultivate trust in an environment where there are often brief points of contact between co-workers and potentially long stretches of time without contact at all. Even the relationships we have with department members we sit near, or even eat lunch with, lack the depth of connection we usually have in our personal lives.

It makes it difficult for designers to design for conversations when team members are not familiar with each other or a negative relationship with trust has already been established. But overcoming this is essential; trust must be established early and quick, and continued to be cultivated throughout any project or task, starting with our most basic workplace conversations.

Below are a few things to consider when designing for the element of trust within effective conversational spaces.



"The data also suggest that team psychological safety is something beyond interpersonal trust; there was evidence of a coherent interpersonal climate within each group characterized by the absence or presence of a blend of trust, respect for each other's competence, and caring about each other as people" (Edmondson 375).



Three Considerations of Designing Conversations to Establish Trust

■ ESTABLISH THE RIGHT TEAM LEADER

We've all heard the phrase: *shit rolls downhill*. This is especially true in group settings, where a team leader's hidden fears, control issues, or indifference can stifle any chance of achieving an authentic degree of trust. If this is a place that the innermost turmoil of the self can show up, then it becomes essential for a team leader to be someone who trusts themselves enough to know that they must trust their team. "If the facilitator does not believe in the group, this comes out in subtle ways... Any group knows when it is being trifled with or dishonoured. The people will never really trust that facilitator again" (The Institute of Cultural Affairs 35).

In the *New York Times Magazine* article, "What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team," one team's engineer recalls his group experience with fondness, telling the researchers how: "his team leader was 'direct and straightforward, which creates a safe space for you to take risks'" (Duhigg). Not surprisingly, that particular team "was among Google's accomplished groups" (Duhigg). The transparency, sincerity, and openness of a team lead will directly set the tone and support the direction of any group of co-workers—new to each other, or not.

But what can a designer do if the team leader is inexperienced or the choice is beyond their control? Design leadership must step in and play a role in establishing "the right" team leaders. Yet, this is

creators and partners in a networked and connected way—goes hand-in-hand with learning organizations.



When Value Statements and Identity Don't Align

In 1994, a book titled *Built to Last* entered the scene. Written by Jim Collins and Jerry Porras, it touted the benefits of developing and publishing an organization's core values, "provoking managers to stampede to off-site meetings in order to conjure up some core values of their own" (Lencioni). This "fad," as Lencioni labels it, is still an intrinsic part of many companies today.

Here are a few examples of some famous companies' values:

- **AARP**
Impact, Innovation, Humanity, Empowerment and Honesty
- **NETFLIX**
Integrity, Excellence, Respect, Inclusion, and Collaboration
- **FACEBOOK**
Be Bold, Focus on Impact, Move Fast, Be Open, Build

The Power of Negative Narratives

Human beings seek patterns. Author Esther Choy writes of us: "It is our innate nature to connect the dots" (Choy 19). But what happens when a narrative, written over time based on a perceived identity, needs to be rewritten? "Once a story has taken root in hearts and minds, it's extremely difficult to challenge its validity. As a leader, if you don't connect the dots proactively... others will fill it in for you" (Choy 20).

Yet leaders rarely come to their positions at the *beginning*, where they can help shape their team or organization's culture; most positions come with inherited baggage and assumptions, and eventually — unless resisted — an indoctrination into *this is how we do things here*.

The good news is that very few organizations are without some positive cultural component to build off of – and that is where the conversation can often get off the ground – *what are we doing right?* What is working? What is engaging people?

Developing an *attack* strategy, built off of open and honest communication, incorporating elements of all four human conversational needs can begin to address an established negative narrative. Over time, this corporate story can be changed; but everyone will need to participate in the heavy lifting.





[GO BACK: Twenty Years in Design, Pt. 2](#)

SECTION III

[UP NEXT: Wicked Problems](#)



Tools of the Trade

As you can see with the previous "Twenty Years in Design", design has experienced many transitions over the years. It has lost its rigid edges and blurred with other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, engineering, linguistics and anthropology. While 'traditional' forms of 1st and 2nd orders of design work are highly rewarding and necessary, it is the growth into newer 3rd and 4th orders we have witnessed most profoundly these last few years.

These tiers of work require designers to dig into the very root of *how things work*, to design more authentic, integrated and holistic experiences, to recognize connections, to synthesize broad

"Expanded forms of design practice do not abandon the traditional concerns of form-giving and making that have defined design in the past. It is the concept of form that has grown more supple and

“CHAT CHALLENGE” SAMPLES

Design the Conversation

CHAT CHALLENGE

MAP YOUR COMPANY'S CULTURE



What you need to get started:

- 4 different colored post-its: green, yellow, pink, purple
- Markers
- Whiteboard (or large piece of paper)

As described in *Design the Conversation*, we often become part of the system of behaviors around us. Culture, especially the negative aspects of it, are *someone else's fault* and we rarely pause to reflect how our own behaviors and words, both internally and externally, can contribute to this narrative.

Mapping is an excellent way to “get it out there” - allowing a chance for teams to come together to identify opportunities to improve processes and communication.

Challenge: I'm challenging you to map out your own company's culture! Start by visiting this website article: [“How to map out your company culture - and improve your employee experience as a result”](#) on greenhouse.io's website. This resource is an excellent way to guide your team through the process of mapping culture. Follow along each step, ask the questions and see where the conversation takes you.

While this can be done alone, I encourage you to get collaborative!

Design the Conversation

CHAT CHALLENGE

ACTIVE LISTENING AWARENESS



Challenge: Let's reimagine one of our weekly meetings. Choose a routinely held meeting and plan ways to shake things up - we all get in ruts and our meetings are no different.

The goal here is to encourage all team members to be more present, to reduce distractions, to engage on a higher level and to practice turn taking, if that is not already a quality.

This is best completed in a group setting so ... get collaborative!

In the post “Human Needs in Conversation” on *Design the Conversation*, we outlined a 75-to-25% listening to talking ratio. Are you confident you follow this advice in your day to day? Becoming more aware of patterns of listening and talking is the first step to enhancing the quality of our workplace conversations.

In the post “Designing for... active listening” I discussed the reality of our lives in ‘information overload’ - and our meetings are one area that is suffering the consequences.

This exercise starts long before the meeting. Spend some time reflecting first: Does every attendee really need to be there? Reducing the number of people may lead to more open discussions. Does it need to be a full one hour? Shaving off a mere 15 mins might encourage productivity. Are presentations engaging? Design shorter and more vibrant stories in your content to keep people from daydreaming. Is tech too prevalent? Plan for a “tech break” every 20 to 30 mins so the team can stay focused, but still feel ‘plugged in’ to the outside world.

POST STATUS TRACKING SHEET

Tracking ☆ 📁 ☁							
File Edit View Insert Format Data Tools Add-ons Help							
↶ ↷ 🖨 📄 90% ▾ \$ % .0 .00 123 ▾ Default (Ari... ▾ 10 ▾ B <i>I</i> <u>S</u> A ...							
A1 fx Status							
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Status				Word Count	Committee	
2			Main page				
3	1st draft		About the Researcher		953	uploaded to VT	
4							
5			Section 1 (Yellow)	Intro			
6	1st draft	1.1	The journey to <i>Design the Conversation</i>		609	uploaded to VT	
7	1st draft	1.2	What is Conversation Design		910	uploaded to VT	
8	1st draft	1.3	Why <i>Design</i> Conversation?		1658	uploaded to VT	
9	1st draft	1.4	The Influencers		955	uploaded to VT	
10							
11			Section 2 (Pink)	Conversation defined			
12	1st Draft	2.1	What can I expect to learn here		345	uploaded to VT	
13	1st Draft	2.2	Defining Conversation		1216	uploaded to VT	
14	1st Draft	2.3	Human Needs in Conversation		2077	uploaded to VT	
15	1st Draft	2.4	Identity forms Culture		1774	uploaded to VT	
16			Popout: They Said it better				
17			"Peter Senge & The Learning Organization"				
18	1st Draft	2.5	Forces Underming Good Conversation		1600	uploaded to VT	
19	1st Draft	2.6	Connecting the Dots		1314	uploaded to VT	
20			Popout: Down the Rabbit Hole				
21			"Cross-disciplinary communicators and dissent"				
22							
23			Section 3 (Green)	Design today			
24	1st draft	3.1	What can I expect to learn here		489	uploaded to VT	
25	1st draft	3.2	Twenty Years in Design		4044	uploaded to VT	
26			Popout: Down the Rabbit Hole				
27			"A mini recap of the 1960s-1990s"				
28	1st draft	3.3	Tools of the Trade		2527	uploaded to VT	
29	1st draft	3.4	Wicked Problems		1368	uploaded to VT	
30			Feature: Lets Get Weird				
31			"Exploring all the -- disciplinaries"				
32							
33			Section 4 (Orange)	Lets do this			
34	Rough Draft	4.1	What can I expect to learn here		350	uploaded to VT	
35	1st draft	4.2	Designing for.... understanding / common ground		2340	uploaded to VT	
36			Feature: They Said it better				
37			"What is conversation mapping?"				
38	1st draft	4.3	Designing for.... trust		1852	uploaded to VT	
39			Feature: They Said it better				
40			"Trust as the Essential Ingredient in Influence"				
41	1st draft	4.4	Designing for.... active listening		1354	uploaded to VT	
42			Feature: Lets Get Weird				
43			"An Anti-Powerpoint manifesto"				
44	1st draft	4.5	Designing for.... humor / play		1333	uploaded to VT	
45			Popout: Down the Rabbit Hole				
46			"Exploring de Bono's 6 Thinking Hats technique"				
47	1st draft	4.6	Defining Metrics, Creating Value		3098	uploaded to VT	
48							
49			Section 5 (Blue)	Buttoning things up			
50	1st draft	5.1	Systems approach to conversation design		1844		
51	1st draft	5.2	Further reading/listening/viewing				

appendix III

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