

SOCIETY OF DESIGN THINKING PROFESSIONALS NEWSLETTER



Volume 2: Issue 9

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FOUNDER'S SPEAK

"Great leadership, like great design, is born from empathy. It is not about imposing solutions but about uncovering possibilities."



Leadership is often defined by the ability to make decisions, but truly great leadership lies in the ability to design the way forward, not just decide it. Design Thinking brings a structured yet flexible approach to leadership—one that is human-centric, iterative, and grounded in empathy.

In a fast-changing world, leaders can no longer rely on rigid frameworks or past successes. They must embrace uncertainty, listen actively, and create space for experimentation. Design Thinking offers a way to navigate complexity by shifting the focus from problems to possibilities, from authority to collaboration. It ensures that leadership is not about imposing solutions but about uncovering them through insight, creativity, and co-creation.

A leader who applies Design Thinking doesn't ask, *What should we do?* but rather, *How might we create something better?* They analyze challenges objectively, design thoughtful strategies, develop practical solutions, and iterate based on real-world feedback. This mindset fosters organizations that are resilient, innovative, and continuously evolving.

At its heart, great leadership—like great design—is built on empathy, adaptability, and purpose. When leaders design solutions with their teams instead of for them, they inspire trust, unlock creativity, and drive meaningful impact.

Lead by Design, Inspire by Empathy!

Dr. Jimmy Jain
Founder
Society of Design Thinking Professionals

Editor's Speak

"Great leadership isn't about having all the answers—it's about designing the right questions."

Leadership is about shaping experiences, fostering innovation, and co-creating meaningful solutions. In a world driven by rapid change, traditional leadership approaches often fall short. This is where Design Thinking emerges as a powerful philosophy—one that prioritizes empathy, creativity, and continuous iteration.

To lead with Design Thinking is to embrace curiosity, challenge assumptions, and design solutions that are not only effective but deeply human-centric. It shifts leadership from a position of authority to one of collaboration, where decisions are informed by real needs rather than rigid structures.

This mindset means listening intently, understanding pain points, and designing experiences that resonate. It means viewing leadership as an evolving process—an opportunity to iterate, refine, and improve based on feedback. Most importantly, it means leading with empathy, ensuring that the people we serve are at the heart of every decision.

Feel free to write to me at afreen@sdtp.co.uk, in case of feedback, input, or if you want us to cover any specific topic.

Afreen Fatima
Manager - Customer Success | Content
| Community
Society of Design Thinking
Professionals



Reimagining Leading with Design Thinking



Leadership today extends far beyond traditional management—it's about creating environments where innovation thrives, collaboration deepens, and solutions emerge organically. In a rapidly evolving business landscape, organizations that cultivate adaptability and creativity outperform those that rely on rigid structures. A study by McKinsey & Company found that companies that integrate human-centered design principles into their leadership strategies see a 32% higher revenue growth and a 56% higher return to shareholders compared to their peers.

Design Thinking, widely adopted by top organizations like Apple, Google, and IBM, has revolutionized product innovation—and now, it's reshaping leadership. This human-centered, iterative approach helps leaders move beyond hierarchical decision-making to co-creating solutions with their teams. Instead of simply delegating tasks, Design Thinking leaders empower individuals, nurture creativity, and drive engagement.

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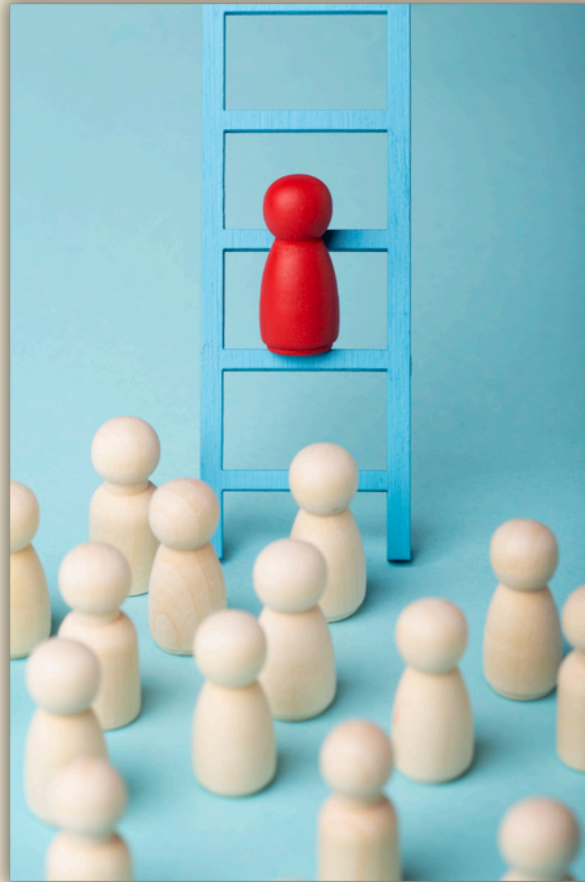
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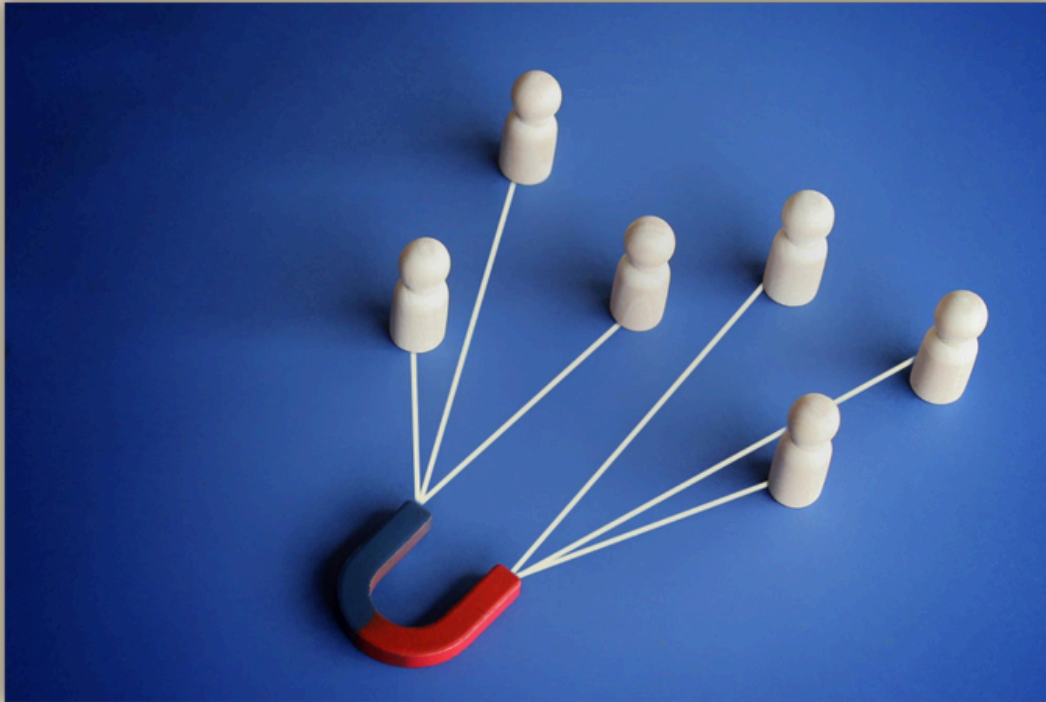
Reimagining Leading with Design Thinking



The shift from traditional management to people-centered leadership is also backed by neuroscience. Studies from Harvard Business Review indicate that leaders who practice empathy, active listening, and collaborative problem-solving create higher-performing teams, reducing turnover by up to 50%. Employees who feel heard and valued are 4.6 times more likely to perform their best work, reinforcing the idea that leadership isn't just about directing—it's about designing an ecosystem where people and ideas flourish.

By embracing Design Thinking, leaders transition from top-down enforcers to facilitators of innovation, fostering an agile, resilient, and empowered workforce.

Empathy: Leading with Understanding



At the heart of Design Thinking is empathy—an essential trait for leaders striving to create strong, engaged teams. Just as we seek to understand customers' pain points, a great leader listens, observes, and deeply understands their team's challenges, motivations, and aspirations. Leadership is not about having all the answers but about asking the right questions. Coaching, active listening, and fostering open conversations allow leaders to build trust and unlock potential.

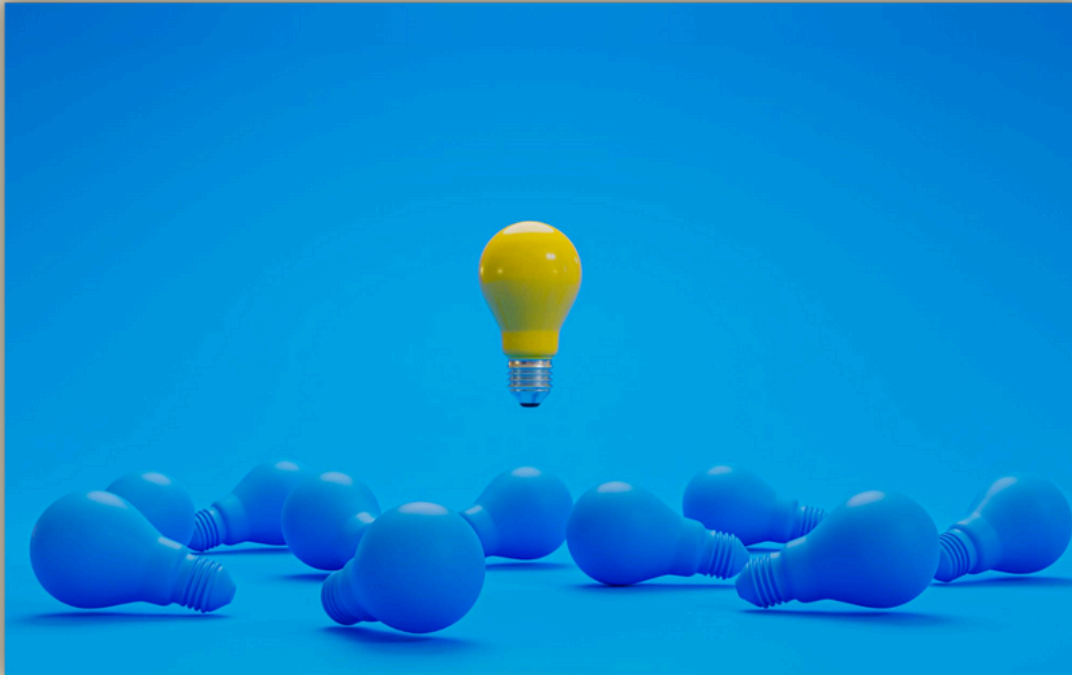
A true leader doesn't impose solutions but co-creates them by empowering team members to find their own paths. When leaders prioritize understanding over authority, they cultivate a culture of psychological safety, where people feel valued and heard.

One remarkable example of this approach is Microsoft under Satya Nadella's leadership. When Nadella became CEO in 2014, he shifted Microsoft's rigid, performance-driven culture to one built on empathy, curiosity, and collaboration. He emphasized a growth mindset, encouraging leaders to listen more and create an environment where employees felt safe to innovate and take risks. [<https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/microsofts-ceo-on-how-empathy-sparks-innovation/>]

This transformation was largely influenced by Design Thinking principles, including deep customer and employee empathy. By prioritizing understanding and coaching-based leadership, Microsoft saw a cultural shift, leading to a market value surge from \$300 billion in 2014 to over \$2.5 trillion by 2024. [<https://news.microsoft.com/source/features/innovation/empathy-innovation-accessibility/>]

Nadella's leadership exemplifies how empathy-driven leadership fosters innovation, engagement, and sustained success—proving that when leaders truly understand their teams, they create workplaces where people thrive and businesses excel. [<https://press.farm/satya-nadellas-microsoft-leadership/>]

Ideation: Facilitating Innovation, Not Dictating It



The best ideas rarely come from a single mind; they emerge from collaboration. A leader's role is not to dictate but to facilitate—to create a space where ideas flow freely, team members build on each other's thoughts, and diverse perspectives lead to breakthrough innovations.

Just as effective brainstorming sessions rely on structure and encouragement, so does great leadership. Encouraging open dialogue, recognizing contributions, and fostering a growth mindset enable teams to solve problems creatively and own their successes. A leader who embraces ideation shifts from being the "knower" to being the enabler, unlocking collective intelligence and driving real impact.

Research underscores that leaders who facilitate collaboration and embrace diverse perspectives significantly enhance their teams' innovation and problem-solving capabilities. A study analyzing 4,011 video game projects found that gender-diverse teams with inclusive practices experienced a 0.04 to 0.09 standard deviation increase in creativity. This highlights that diversity, when coupled with inclusion, fosters a more innovative environment.

[\[https://arxiv.org/abs/2204.08505\]](https://arxiv.org/abs/2204.08505)

Furthermore, a comprehensive analysis of 32.9 million papers over five decades revealed that teams with diverse institutional collaborations were more likely to produce highly innovative work. Notably, smaller teams with greater diversity often outperformed larger, less diverse teams within a single institution.

[\[https://arxiv.org/abs/1806.03694\]](https://arxiv.org/abs/1806.03694)

These findings emphasize the pivotal role leaders play in fostering an environment where diverse ideas are welcomed and collaboration is encouraged. By shifting from a directive approach to one that enables and facilitates, leaders can unlock their teams' full creative potential, leading to sustained innovation and success.

Iteration: Learning, Adapting, and Growing Together



Great products evolve and improve through continuous iteration and refinement. The same principle applies to leadership. The best leaders don't expect perfection on day one; they experiment, learn, and adjust. They recognize that trust, like great design, is built over time.

Early leadership decisions can define team dynamics. When faced with a critical decision, a design-thinking leader doesn't impose authority but engages the team in finding solutions together. Rather than discarding existing work in favor of a personal vision, they test, gather feedback, and co-create improvements. This iterative approach builds trust, fosters resilience, and ensures that leadership is not about control but about shared ownership.

Incorporating an iterative approach in leadership mirrors the continuous refinement seen in successful product development. This methodology emphasizes ongoing learning and adaptation, fostering environments where both leaders and teams evolve together.

Research underscores the efficacy of iterative processes in leadership. A study highlighted that iterative testing is central to understanding systems and implementing adaptive changes, thereby enhancing leaders' capacity to guide improvement initiatives. This approach enables leaders to remain agile, adjusting strategies based on real-time feedback and evolving circumstances.

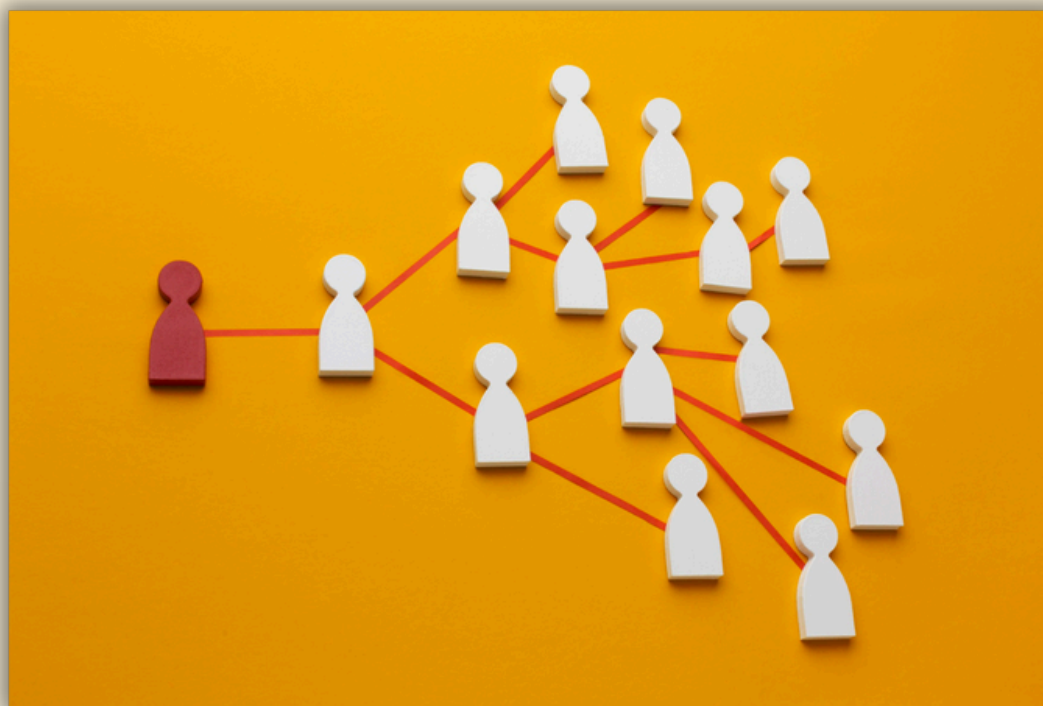
[<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1389828.pdf?>]

Moreover, iterative decision-making has been identified as a hallmark of adaptive leadership. This practice involves observing outcomes, interpreting results, and intervening with informed strategies, recognizing that initial solutions may require refinement. Such a cycle promotes a culture where experimentation is valued, and learning from each iteration leads to more effective leadership practices.

[<https://www.richardharmer.com/blog/iterative-decision-making>]

Embracing iteration in leadership not only enhances problem-solving capabilities but also builds trust within teams. By engaging team members in the decision-making process and valuing their input, leaders cultivate a sense of ownership and commitment among their staff. This collaborative environment encourages resilience and adaptability, essential traits in today's dynamic organizational landscapes.

Designing a Future Where Leadership Inspires and Empowers



Leaders who embrace Design Thinking do more than just manage—they become architects of possibility, shaping environments where people are empowered to innovate, collaborate, and thrive. This approach reshapes leadership from a position of authority to a role centered on designing meaningful experiences that elevate individuals and teams alike.

A study on design-led economies underscores the transformative power of this approach, revealing that businesses and communities that embed design principles into leadership witness higher levels of adaptability, innovation, and sustained growth (The Australian). The reason is simple: when leaders think like designers, they shift from merely solving problems to anticipating future challenges, co-creating solutions, and continuously refining their strategies based on real-world feedback.

True leadership is not about control—it's about creating conditions where innovation becomes second nature, challenges turn into opportunities, and every individual feels valued and empowered. Organizations that adopt Design Thinking as a leadership mindset don't just navigate change; they drive it, setting new benchmarks for success and sustainability.

Incorporating Design Thinking into leadership does more than redefine how leaders interact with their teams—it reimagines how they envision, build, and lead the future. This shift fosters workplaces where curiosity fuels progress, collaboration sparks transformation, and every individual plays a vital role in shaping a thriving, forward-looking organization.

Views from Thought Leader - Mr. Bruhad Buch

"Leadership, guided by Design Thinking, thrives on asking the right questions, embracing uncertainty, and co-creating solutions that drive meaningful change."



Bruhad Buch is a leadership coach, a Design Thinking Practitioner by profession, and a solutionist at heart. As the founder of AUMASOLUTIONISTS, he is dedicated to helping individuals and organizations find customized solutions by focusing on the "How" along with the "What" and "Why." With expertise in corporate training, business consulting, and leadership coaching, Bruhad has impacted over 10,000 lives and is on a mission of creating 1 million solutionists by 2025.

Through future-ready methodologies, ROI-based learning, and Design Thinking solutions, he has worked with individuals, startups, SMEs, and enterprises to drive sustainable growth. Join Bruhad as he shares insights on Reimagining Leading through Design Thinking and unlocking new possibilities for innovation and transformation.

How can design thinking help leaders shift from a directive mindset to a more collaborative and innovative leadership approach?

The fundamental premise of Design Thinking revolves around human beings, and that's the first major shift many people haven't fully understood. We're still largely focused on problem-solving, logic, structures, and processes—everything that is tangible. However, human emotions are often ignored, and as a result, leaders struggle to truly lead from the front.

Traditional leadership follows a linear approach—step one, step two, step three, and so on. Design thinking, however, is more circular. You can move from step one to three, then back to two, jump to four, and so on, depending on the user. Since everything revolves around the user, leadership becomes more intuitive and empathetic.

Empathy, in this context, isn't just about stepping into someone else's shoes; it's about deeply understanding the problem, connecting with your own instincts, and then taking meaningful action. This shift from a rigid, process-driven mindset to a user-centric, iterative approach is how design thinking enables leaders to transition to more collaborative and innovative leadership.

You emphasize being a solutionist rather than a consultant. How does this approach redefine leadership in today's dynamic business landscape?

It's quite simple. Consultants typically ask *why*. I ask *what* and *how*.

Consultants focus on growth—how to reach the next level. My focus, however, is on internalization and intrinsic motivation, helping individuals realize their potential and move forward.

For example, a consultant might ask, Why are there no structured processes in the organization? The responses are often filled with justifications—We didn't benchmark, we lacked resources, we were too busy.

On the other hand, I ask, What will enable you to perform at your full potential? This question forces introspection. The answer isn't immediate—it requires deeper thought. What drives one person may not motivate another, and recognizing these unique motivators is crucial for meaningful growth.

My role is to plant a seed in the individual's mind—helping them bloom where they are planted. We don't always have control over where life places us, but we do have control over our mindset, behavior, and actions. True transformation happens when individuals accept their strengths, motivations, and potential. Models and frameworks provide structure, but real change begins with self-awareness and acceptance.

What leadership qualities have you seen evolve in the leaders you have coached using Design Thinking principles? How does this transformation impact organizational culture?

I call this the **COAL** framework.

Coal, when refined, turns into something valuable—just like leaders. The four key traits that emerge through Design Thinking are:

1. **Curiosity** – The willingness to ask questions, explore, and challenge assumptions.
2. **Openness** – The ability to accept different perspectives and embrace change.
3. **Adaptability** – The flexibility to move between different approaches without rigid structures.
4. **Learnability** – The drive to continuously learn from interactions and experiences.

Many leaders initially see Design Thinking as just another problem-solving tool. However, once they begin applying it, they realize it's a mindset shift. They start using it in different aspects of their lives—interacting with their teams, families, and even their personal relationships.

The transformation happens in three phases:

1. **Unconscious Habit Formation** – Leaders unknowingly start internalizing curiosity, openness, adaptability, and learnability.
2. **Evangelizing the Approach** – They don't just use it at work; they apply it in personal interactions as well.
3. **The 'Aha' Moments** – As they experience small successes, they become more invested in the process, making it a natural part of their leadership style.

This gradual shift creates a ripple effect, fostering a culture of innovation, collaboration, and trust within organizations.

Could you share a real-life example where you saw this transformation take place?

Definitely, I can share a case study. Last year, I worked with the Learning & Development (L&D) Head of a manufacturing unit. He wanted to understand how L&D could transition from being seen as a support function to becoming a strategic partner. During our discussions, he outlined their existing approach:

1. They had predefined training processes and mandates.
2. They decided who needed training and on what topics.
3. They measured effectiveness using the Kirkpatrick Model.
4. They focused on delivering a great training experience.

I challenged this by asking, *“Have you ever asked the learners how they want to learn?”*

His response was, *“Why would we? We are the experts.”*

So, we conducted a user survey with 75-100 employees across levels, giving them a checklist to define their preferred learning methods. The results were eye-opening. Based on the feedback, the L&D team made three major changes:

1. **Redefined Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)** – They moved from measuring training completion rates to a single metric: Customer Experience Score. This score covered:
 - Learning agility
 - Application of knowledge
 - Training logistics and experience
 - Employee engagement and evangelization
 - Contribution to the bottom line

2. **Shifted Learning Methods** – Employees expressed that they didn’t want traditional LMS modules or classroom training. Instead, they preferred on-the-job learning and cross-functional exposure to understand different roles within the company.

3. **Built a Culture of Trust** – Employees started directly seeking knowledge from colleagues across functions rather than waiting for formal training. This transformed the organization’s learning culture entirely.

By applying Design Thinking, we first conducted empathy interviews, followed by defining the problem statement using what and how techniques. This led to meaningful, user-driven transformation in the company’s approach to learning and development.

That’s a powerful example of how a mindset shift can lead to tangible organizational change.

Absolutely. When you put the user at the center of your decisions—whether in leadership, learning, or business strategy—transformation happens organically. By applying Design Thinking, we didn’t just refine the learning and development strategy; we reimagined it entirely. The insights from empathy interviews helped us craft solutions that resonated deeply with employees, making learning more engaging and relevant. Defining the problem statement with "what" and "how" techniques ensured that our approach addressed real needs rather than assumptions. As a result, the organization saw higher engagement, improved skill retention, and a culture shift toward continuous learning and innovation.

Follow Bruhad's Work

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Leadership Reimagined: A Future by Design



As we reimagine leadership through the lens of Design Thinking, we recognize that great leaders are experience architects, culture shapers, and catalysts for innovation. By embedding empathy, ideation, and iteration into leadership, we move beyond rigid structures and embrace a more dynamic, human-centered approach—one that fosters creativity, nurtures collaboration, and inspires continuous growth.

The future belongs to those who design with purpose, lead with empathy, and adapt with agility. It is no longer about dictating solutions but about co-creating a shared vision where everyone has the space to thrive. The best leaders don't just manage change; they design it, refine it, and make it meaningful.

"A leader is best when people barely know they exist. When their work is done, their aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves." ~ *Lao Tzu*

"Empathy is the cornerstone of a successful design. Without understanding the needs of people, innovation is just an idea." ~ *Tim Brown (CEO of IDEO)*

"The role of a designer is that of a good, thoughtful host anticipating the needs of his guests." ~ *Charles Eames*

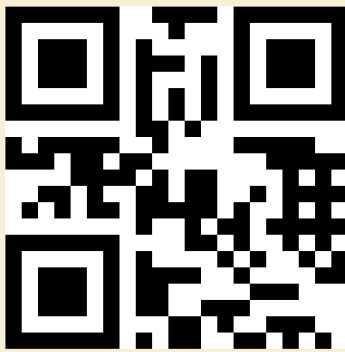
"Fail early, fail often, but always fail forward." ~ *John C. Maxwell*

"Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works." ~ *Steve Jobs*

"The best way to predict the future is to design it." ~ *Buckminster Fuller*

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