

Design Thinking in Enterprise Transformation: Using Empathy to Learn and Meet the Organization's Needs

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Is an enterprise transformation a project, or a product? Is it a temporary activity with a defined start and end towards one finished objective, marked by a set of outputs along the way?

Do we close it down when we've marked off each output from our list, admired our Gantt chart one last time, dusted off our hands, and proclaimed: "Done! The transformation is complete. You have installed JIRA, teams do Scrum, the Project Managers are christened Product Owners, and IT has set up Azure DevOps. You are now forever Agile!"?

While some executives may think of transformation in this way – a project to be finished in 6, 9 or 18 months – Enterprise Agilists understand that transformation is a continually evolving, outcome-oriented organic process, aimed at seeking and improving business agility as a response to our shifting, kaleidoscopic world of accelerating complexity.

In this way, enterprise transformations share the characteristics of a product, such as an on-going purpose, and the need to provide value over a long-term lifecycle in a process requiring development with continuous, iterative improvement. The key outcome, or North Star, is business agility.

Unlike a project, transformation is never truly *done*, but is engaged in what Skelton calls *continuous stewardship*. Once coaches able to talk with leadership about the product-like nature of the transformation – maybe it should be termed a *socio-technological meta-product* – we can also explain why product-like mindsets and practices are the best fit for it. And here is where **Design Thinking** comes into play.

Although popularized in the 2000s by Brown, the CEO of Silicon-Valley's famed design firm IDEO, and widely taught at Stanford's dSchool, its origins lie in the mid-20th century. Based in a creative, experimental AI and generative mindset, it begins with *empathy* for users and customers as *people*, each seeking an outcome or solution to fulfil their purposes, needs and wants.

As learned from System Thinking, the transformation work begins at the *social system* level. So it's easy to see how Design Thinking, aimed at the *level of the individual* group, team, and person, complements systemic work. Both kinds of thinking can be seen as two sides of the same coin. Both are *pro-social*.

So considering the systems of the corporation, coaches also think about the people within the system in an empathetic way derived from Design Thinking. This applies to all the people: leadership, middle management, team leaders, teams, front-line workers, and every individual struggling to do their work in a challenging place.

From this perspective, coaches begin the transformation work with leadership as co-creative design process: “Nothing about you without you.” Design thinking offers a 5-state fluid loop-flow, each of which can be repeatedly carried out with workshops, trainings, coaching presence, and conversations with the Liberating Structures.

Coaches also rock-step back a moment to think of the systemic effects and changes required to meet the people where they are and where they want to be. Think of this as a kind of dance, like coaching itself.

Change coaches seek, with humility and empathy, *first to understand the purposes, needs, and wants of the people and groups in the system by observing and engaging them*. To draw out key obstacles that prevent them from meeting their goals, from working in their best, most authentic and most effective way. What blocks their purpose, limiting their autonomy, frustrating their mastery? The same for the enterprise as a whole. Here the enterprise is a user, too. Coaches listen to the answers with open curiosity.

Having gathered these insights, *then coaches facilitate leadership to meld and shape them into a current problem, need, or sets of related problems and needs*. It requires working with leadership intently to support them as they clarify these problems for themselves in their own language, in a way that makes sense for them now.

Once we have this problem crystal-clear, it can be useful to walk it around the firm in a Lean *nemawashi* to gain buy-in and alignment, to help all levels of the organization coalesce around the issue and the need to collaborate in its solution.

Next, coaches move onward to engaging wide-open, creative brain-storming and idea generation. Sifting through these results with care is necessary to ensure an objective and non-judgemental assessment verifying that they address the problem, are in leadership’s control, and are fit to form a prototypable experiment.

That done, *the coach then guides leadership to chose exactly one to be the first experiment*, where do deploy it and for how long, with an agreed success metric, and with a small, relevant front-line team to create it as a rapid prototypical solution.

Finally, the designated team runs its experiment, collects results, and reports back to the larger group. Several iterations may be necessary to find the better-for-now result that satisfies the success metric.

Having validated the worth of this experiment, it's useful to run more wide *nemawashi* rounds to ensure it's fit-for-purpose for the broader audience. Without this consultation, management and staff rejects change. Upfront inclusion, involvement, the ability to propose their ideas, to raise their own problems and context, to offer candid challenges, all with a sense of feeling heard, sharply reduces change resistance.

With feedback, tweak and re-tweak the proposed solution. Those doing the work are the experts. The transformation learns from them, with them. They enact and embody the change. And all together, the firm continues forward to iterate on current issues towards the North Star, business agility.