Joshua Interview Notes

Joshua: Beyond Tools: Rethinking Human-Centered Design and Behavioral Change

When examining the way organizations attempt to influence human behavior, a striking observation emerges—many rely on hope rather than structured strategy. They assume that motivation and behavior change will naturally follow from their systems and processes, yet when asked to demonstrate how, they often struggle to articulate a clear method. Unlike assembling IKEA furniture, which comes with a step-by-step guide, altering human behavior lacks a universal manual. This is because behavior change is complex, layered, and deeply personal.

Through Joshua's experience, he observed a recurring theme in organizations: they hoped employees would be committed, hoped their company culture would be embraced, hoped their strategies would align with human behavior. But hope, without execution, leads to failure. This disconnect between intention and execution was the driving force behind Joshua's journey into behavioral science.

Joshua: The Limits of Design Thinking

Joshua's time at Stanford's d.school introduced him to design thinking, a framework widely adopted in business and innovation. However, his initial reaction was skepticism. Design thinking primarily offers tools—empathy mapping, journey mapping, prototyping—but tools alone do not create fundamental change. A powerful analogy illustrates this: Imagine giving a controversial figure, like Donald Trump, an empathy mapping exercise. After spending two hours meticulously analyzing thoughts, feelings, pains, and gains, would he genuinely become more empathetic? Likely not. The tool itself is not enough because behavior change isn't just about performing an action; it's about fundamentally becoming something new.

Joshua: Understanding Behavior: People First, Process Second

The key to influencing behavior isn't about providing more tools—it's about understanding why people act the way they do. A simple example is speeding. We have multiple tools to deter speeding: speed limit signs, police officers, and even speedometers in cars. Yet, people still speed. Why? Because their relationship with time and personal priorities override external rules. If someone were to hit a pedestrian, however, their behavior might shift instantly—not because of a sign but because of a fundamental shift in values.

Joshua: Redefining Empathy: More Than Just a Tool

Empathy is often framed as a soft skill, but it is deeply intertwined with cognition and decision-making. Many struggle with empathy because it requires stepping out of one's own perspective, which can feel like a loss of control or power. The world often conditions people to value certainty and authority, making it difficult to admit "I don't know"—yet this is the foundation of genuine empathy. True empathy is not just about acknowledging someone else's experience but about prioritizing that person's perspective. A leader, for instance, cannot expect employees to regulate their emotions, challenge biases, or engage deeply if they themselves haven't mastered these skills. Leadership, therefore, begins with self-awareness—practicing what one expects from others.

Joshua: The Human Factor in Business and Consulting

In modern organizations, there is a clear division between behavioral work (culture, HR) and operational work (efficiency, productivity, revenue). This is a mistake. Behavior and operations are deeply connected. Productivity, revenue, and efficiency are driven by people, yet many organizations fail to recognize this. This realization influenced Joshua's approach to consulting. The traditional consulting model operates under the flawed assumption that the consultant is the smartest person in the room. But effective consulting is not about showing off expertise—it's about creating frameworks that empower people to improve their own systems.

Joshua: Conclusion: Moving from Knowledge to Understanding

To truly create impactful change, there is a need to shift from process-driven strategies to people-centered methodologies. The key is not just knowing what needs to be done but experiencing and internalizing it. This means bridging the gap between what is thought, what is valued, and what is done. When that alignment happens, change becomes not just possible, but inevitable.

Joshua: Rethinking Consulting: A Human-Centered Approach

In traditional consulting, the consultant is often seen as the smartest person in the room—the expert who has all the answers. But in a truly human-centered approach, this mindset shifts. When Joshua walks into a room full of wedding planners, he may be the one speaking about human-centered design, but he is not the expert in wedding planning—they are. Joshua's job is not to impose knowledge but to facilitate and cultivate their lived experiences, values, and expertise into actionable insights. Human-centered design is not about thinking less of oneself but about thinking more about others. It requires elevating the voices and knowledge of the people in the room. A consultant's role is to guide, not dictate—to bring out the insights and wisdom that already exist within individuals and organizations. This challenges the traditional consulting model, which often operates from a place of intellectual superiority. A consultant should not be someone on whom organizations depend indefinitely. Instead, the goal should be to empower and equip clients so they no longer need the consultant for the same problem twice. If a consultant has done his job well, the organization should emerge stronger, more knowledgeable, and more self-sufficient.

Joshua: Empathy: The Core of Human-Centered Work

A powerful quote about empathy states that there are two types of people in the world:

● Some walk into a room and say, "Here I am."

● Others walk in and say, "There you are. I've been looking for you."

Traditional consulting tends to embody the "Here I am" mindset—presenting knowledge and expecting others to learn from it. But true human-centered consulting starts with "There you are" —recognizing the expertise, lived experience, and insights of those served. This shift in values was crucial for Joshua. He has always worked in people-driven organizations, where his role was not to create products, but to build programs and experiences that directly impact people. When Joshua first encountered design thinking, he thought he had found a community of creative minds working toward innovation. But over time, he realized that design thinking often focused on tools rather than transformation. It was about applying methods rather than understanding people at a deep level.

Joshua: Building a Team Around Human-Centered Values

A common challenge in this work is assembling a team that shares the human-centered mindset. Many people are drawn to the idea of human-centered design —the impact it can have, the change it can create—but not everyone is ready to put in the work. True human-centered work requires not only external application but also internal self-development. As a guide, Joshua does not have to be perfect at skills like empathy, ideation, critical thinking, and analytical reasoning, but he does need to be actively working on them. If he expects others to learn and unlearn, he must be doing the same. Some individuals rise to this challenge, excited by the opportunity to grow. Others resist it—not because they are unwilling to put in work hours, but because they are not ready to examine their own beliefs, biases, and values. This is why sustainability in human-centered work depends on an individual's willingness to grow internally. Without that, any external effort will fall apart over time.

Joshua: The Role of Value Systems in Sustaining Change

The key to persisting through difficult, uncomfortable work is value system prioritization. A person's values drive their actions—even when the work is frustrating or emotionally taxing. Someone who values empathy and understanding will push through discomfort because they recognize its greater

purpose. When people struggle to stay committed to this work, their true priorities become clear. Dedication to human-centered work is not just about agreeing with its principles; it is about living them, even when it's difficult.

Joshua: Advice for Future Consultants and Business Students

At universities, especially those with large business programs, there is immense potential to reshape the future of consulting. Students entering this field have the opportunity to adopt a human-centered mindset early, influencing the way organizations operate in the future. How can students develop this mindset?

● Seek out courses and experiences that prioritize human behavior, psychology, and social systems.

● Question traditional models—not just to reject them, but to find ways they can be more human-centered.

● Understand that true learning isn't just about acquiring knowledge, but about transformation.

● Recognize that human-centered design is not just a methodology; it is a way of thinking, working, and valuing people differently.

In response to this growing need, Spill Team School—an initiative led by Joshua—aims to create credentialing programs for students and professionals who want to develop skills in human-centered consulting. Ideally, business schools will begin integrating human-centered approaches into their curriculum, assessing where traditional methods fall short and reimagining education through a more people-first lens.

Joshua: Final Thoughts: The Never-Ending Process of Growth

There is never a final destination in human-centered work—it is an ongoing process. Every program, curriculum, and framework should be constantly evaluated:

● Where is this still not human-centered enough?

● What assumptions are embedded in this approach?

● How can evolution occur?

This work requires collaboration because it is difficult to see gaps from inside the system. Institutions should invite external perspectives, engage students in evaluating programs, and be open to feedback—even when it challenges long-standing practices. For students, the key is to remain critical yet open-minded, holding onto their values while engaging with systems that may not yet fully align with them. A truly human-centered world starts with individuals who practice these values, challenge assumptions, and continuously strive to improve—not just for themselves, but for the people they serve.