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 my experience, I 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 my journey into behavioral science.

The Limits of Design Thinking

My time at Stanford's d.school introduced me to **design thinking**, a framework widely adopted in business and innovation. However, my 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.

The flaw in traditional design thinking is that it assumes that **using tools equates to transformation**. But **true change happens at a deeper level**—within **neural pathways, habitual behaviors, and value systems**. This realization led me to reject the surface-level application of design thinking and instead focus on what was missing: the **human behavioral components** that drive real change.

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**.

This concept is central to **human-centered design**. Tools alone cannot create meaningful change unless they are paired with a **deep understanding of the human experience**. This belief led to the formation of the **Spill Team**, which was built on the principle that design and strategy should **not** rely on untested assumptions about behavior but instead be **validated through human experience**.

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 their own perspective**, which can feel like a loss of control or power. The world often conditions us 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 their 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.

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 my 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**.

Conclusion: Moving from Knowledge to Understanding

To truly create impactful change, we 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 we think, what we value, and what we do**. When that alignment happens, change becomes **not just possible, but inevitable**.

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 I walk into a room full of wedding planners, I may be the one speaking about **human-centered design**, but I am not the expert in **wedding planning**—they are. My 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 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 who organizations **depend on 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 their job well, the organization should emerge **stronger, more knowledgeable, and more self-sufficient**.

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 we serve.

This shift in values was crucial for me. I've always worked in **people-driven** organizations, where my role was not to create **products**, but to build **programs and experiences** that **directly impact people**. When I first encountered **design thinking**, I thought I had found my community—creative minds working toward innovation. But over time, I realized that design thinking often focused on **tools rather than transformation**. It was about **applying** methods rather than **understanding** people at a deep level.

Academia often operates similarly, moving from **one project to the next**, encouraging students to complete assignments without truly internalizing their learning. But in real life, that approach **does not work**. My value system had already been reshaped by my experiences, and I could not accept a framework that overlooked the **human complexity of behavior change**.

Building a Team Around Human-Centered Values

A common challenge in this work is **assembling a team that shares this 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, I don't have to be **perfect** at skills like **empathy, ideation, critical thinking, and analytical reasoning**, but I do need to be **actively working on them**. If I expect others to **learn and unlearn**, I 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**.

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**.

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, we are building **Spill Team School**, which 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**.

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 we evolve?**

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.