Surviving Design Projects

Patterns for Managing Conflict in Creative Workplaces

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Jul 19

Pattern: Ask questions

When confronted with unreasonable expectations, misguided direction, or harsh critique, use questions to de-escalate the emotion, clarify the intent, and create a sense of alignment.

Use when:

- Colleagues are providing direction or critique without a clear rationale and potentially motivated by some other force–politics, misdirected frustrations, personal problems.

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Pattern: Reasonable expectations

Be honest with your colleagues about what you can or cannot accomplish given the constraints.

Use when:

- A to-do list materializes with unrealistic deadlines or other constraints attached.

See also:

- Help me prioritize

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Pattern: Prioritize the portfolio

Think about how a situation or activity will contribute to your "portfolio," which might encompass more than design solutions.

Use when:

- A situation seems so untenable that you know you won't have work that reflects your talent or vision. Instead, think about how this work can round out your portfolio with a different kind of story.

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Pattern: Reflection

Re-state the request or feedback to ensure you understood it correctly. The reflection can take the form of a conversation or written communication.

Use when:

- Historically, you've not been aligned with your colleague and have found yourself delivering things that do not meet expectations.

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Pattern: Change the channel

Use a communications channel that generally makes you uncomfortable, or you have avoided in a particular situation.

Use when:

- You're not making any headway communicating with team members using existing communication channels.

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Pattern: Help me make this better

Invite criticism by starting from a position of wanting to improve.

Use when:

- You love your design ideas and are seeking validation instead of input. Setting yourself up for validation will inevitably yield disappointment because you won't get it. What you will get is criticism, but you may not interpret it constructively if all you're hoping for is immediate buy-in.

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Pattern: Tell me a story

Ask people to relate design ideas, accomplishments, or project status in the form of a story.

Use when:

- All the time.
- People may be able to describe their ideas, but do so without any context or sense of implication.

Positioning it as a story forces them to embed rationale and consequences for their design ideas.

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Pattern: Make it real

Use real examples and be as specific as possible in discussing project plans, scope, or design ideas.

Use when:

- The conversation becomes high level and abstract. Abstractions are easy to throw around, but can be difficult to implement if not supplemented with reality.

Considerations:

- Finding something real can be challenging when stuck in the a conversation about abstractions. Try to zero-in on a specific example of the abstract idea, like a single piece of content, a particular scenario, or the table of contents for a deliverable.

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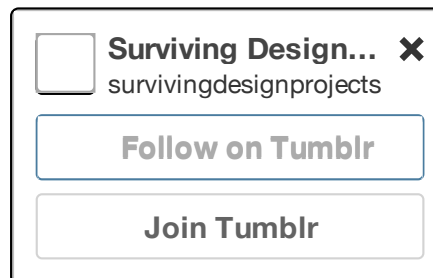
Anti-Pattern: Being the hero

Avoid being the person who swoops in and fixes all the problems, or thinking that's what your job is.

Watch for:

- It's tempting to be the guy who saves the project, but ultimately no one benefits from this approach. It sets unreasonable expectations, breeds resentment, and creates enormous risk.

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Pattern: Meeting as workshop

Plan your meetings as interactive sessions where you educate and provide structured exercises for soliciting input.

Use when:

- All the time, especially when teams struggle to collaborate spontaneously or you're working with new team members. Brainstorming with a little structure is a potent recipe for bringing out the best in colleagues.

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