Surviving Design Projects

Patterns for Managing Conflict in Creative Workplaces

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Dec 05

Pattern: Offer alternatives

Prepare several options for moving forward with an easy way to compare and contrast. It's easier for people to select from a small number of options than it is for them to zero-in on an approach without a starting point.

You might want to compare approaches for:

- Design directions
- Models for explaining users or site structures
- Next steps on a project
- Project plans

The important part of offering options is presenting them in parallel for easy comparison. Select key criteria for comparison: you'll need to anticipate the ways your team wants to choose one and incorporate them prominently in the comparison. Alignment with goals? Cost? Level of effort? Timing? Emphasis on different requirements? Emphasis on user groups? There are any number of ways your options can vary, so make sure they're easy to compare.

Use when:

- Conflict is caused by ambiguous direction and participants are at a loss for determining appropriate approach.

- 2 notes
- Permalink
- Posted at 3:51 PM
- Tagged: pattern

Nov 09

Pattern: Treat it like a project

Apply a project framework to a situation. Looking at the conflict through the rigid structure of a project lens, you can identify what you need to solve the problem.

Projects consist of goals, parameters, requirements, activities, and outputs. Defining elements yield schedules and assignments and risks and dependencies. Projects establish a framework for working together. Using a lens to look at a situation in terms of a project means distancing it from other potential influences like politics.

Use when:

- Situations are causing people to behave in an unstructured way, such that their activities don't clearly align with the project's objectives. (eg: Researching third-party sources for requirements. The project could be, "What do we need to know about this technology that impacts the design?")
- The conflict is not about personality or creative direction, and instead about disparity in priorities. (eg: Getting distracted by a competitor. The project could be, "Does this competitor really matter?")

- 15 notes
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- Posted at 11:20 AM
- Tagged: pattern

Sep 13

Give Negative Feedback Positively

(via @harvest)

I disagree with a few points in this article, but it generally offers some good basic patterns for providing feedback. The article takes a broad position, dealing with all kinds of feedback, but the patterns apply to designers as well.

Always start with the positive?

The article suggests avoiding starting with positive feedback. I appreciate the position: if the news is bad, give it to me right away. At the same time, designers need to hear what's working as well as what's not working about proposed solutions. In incorporating feedback, they want to avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater. (I've done this, and boy was my wife mad.)

When it's hard for me to zero-in on the positives, however, I get the conversation going with this:

> I see a few things that I like here, but I'm distracted by the position of the buttons. It's hard to know where to focus my attention.

Hurt feelings

The article starts off by suggesting that one objective of feedback is to avoid hurt feelings. Managers and colleagues who think they can avoid hurting feelings are fooling themselves. The feelings are the business of the person getting the feedback. That said, effective packaging of feedback can make designers more receptive to the feedback. Poorly packaged feedback will lead to defensiveness, which in turn leads to an unwillingness to respond productively to the feedback.

- 44 notes
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- Posted at 11:14 AM
- Tagged: sources pattern

Sep 06

Pattern: "Last time we spoke…"

Gently remind team members about the outcome of previous conversations.

Use when:

- Confronted with a team member with short-term memory loss, and presenting you with conflicting feedback or direction.

Considerations:

- Capture action items and outcomes in real-time for every meeting to ensure YOU don't suffer from short-term memory loss.

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- Posted at 2:06 PM
- Tagged: pattern

Aug 31

Pattern: Make assumptions

Allow yourself to move forward in the design process by making assumptions about missing inputs. Even if you don't have every requirement captured, every interview complete, or every piece of content inventoried, you can still make progress in solving the design problem. Make some assumptions about the missing inputs, document your assumptions, and prepare a design around them. Discussing the design approach will engage the rest of the team in a dialog about the accuracy of those assumptions.

Use when:

- You can't get any traction in "discovery" or "strategy" activities, which would normally help you frame the design problem.

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- Posted at 12:49 PM
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Aug 08

Anti-Pattern: Playing the victim

The designer blames everyone but himself for the problems occurring on a project.

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- Posted at 6:57 AM
- Tagged: pattern anti-pattern

Aug 04

Pattern: What's your first step?

Ask colleagues what their immediate activity will be upon receiving a new assignment.

Use when:

- Employing a new methodology or technique, and you're not sure how your team will proceed.
- Team members can't offer specific answers about how they'll contribute to the overall project or how they'll address the project's objectives.

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- Posted at 4:47 PM
- Tagged: pattern

Anti-Pattern: Insult colleagues' intelligence

By speaking in lofty terms or abstractions, without getting specific to the project or work at hand, you make your colleagues feel dumb.

This happens when:

- You feel defensive about your work.
- You rely on idealistic methodologies and

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Anti-Pattern: Black box

You go off to your desk and work on the solution to a problem, unveiling your work on the deadline itself. You don't invite critique of the work in progress, ask clarifying questions throughout your process, and get defensive about your methodology.

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- Posted at 4:42 PM
- Tagged: pattern anti-pattern

Aug 02

Pattern: Come back later

Don't respond immediately to a hostile request or insulting communication. Stifle the urge to respond by stepping away from your desk and doing something distracting.

Use when:

- Receiving a message that seems to include counter-productive attacks.

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