

Surviving Design Projects

Patterns for Managing Conflict in Creative Workplaces

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Pattern: Show your work

Expose other members of the team to the design process. While designers and other creative people are generally tempted to show only the result of their labor, pulling back the curtain early in the process can be helpful. Besides involving people in the creative process, showing work can help explain the challenges and justify the decisions made.

Showing work might entail revealing early sketches or concepts, describing the thought process, or including people in brainstorming, critiques, and other conversations along the way.

Use when:

- Confronting difficult design problems to show how you've incorporated and addresses many different inputs or constraints.
- Working with a team that doesn't understand the creative process to demonstrate the complexity of the challenge.
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Pattern: Assert your process

Set the tone, rhythm, and sequence for your process. When embarking on a project, the team may discount the importance of the creative process in problem solving. Other factors — stakeholder schedule and expectations, business milestones, or technical deployment schedules — may influence the approach more than the creative process. Be clear about what the team needs to solve the problem.

Use when:

- Milestones driven by other factors threaten the success of the design project.
- Team members unwittingly undermine the design process by asserting a cadence or sequence that doesn't align with your approach to solving the problem.
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Pattern: Sneak peek

Offer a sneak peek of your work to a lynchpin stakeholder or team member. By holding an

informal, one-on-one conversation you can cultivate an ally for subsequent discussions. Incorporating the feedback of a trusted stakeholder creates a sense of ownership, which can help with facilitating large-group discussions.

Use when:

- You're building toward a potentially controversial or surprising outcome, an inside "ally" can help soften the surprise.
- Your tasks have taken you out of frequent collaboration with key stakeholders. Use the sneak peek to apprise of progress and keep them involved.
- [Permalink](#)
- Posted at 7:33 AM
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Pattern: Call the bluff (or Logical conclusions)

Take a challenge to its inevitable conclusion. For example, when a project manager asks for faster delivery cycles, you can ask whether the stakeholders will be able to assemble their feedback in reasonable time. In these situations, the person making the request does not usually anticipate subsequent impacts of their request.

Use when:

- Faced with a situation which puts unnecessary pressure (usually in quantity of delivery) on the project team.
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[May 11](#)

Pattern: Small Victory

Do a small project (a pilot or proof of concept) to help other teams or organizations understand the value or the purpose of a larger program. Like the "Make it Real" pattern, by doing a pilot project, the team has an opportunity to experience the execution of a particular strategy or direction. By implementing at a small scale, the team can extract lessons learned to set them up for a larger endeavor. This small victory serves as a model for subsequent projects.

Use when:

- You've identified a strategy or direction, but need to get further buy-in.
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[Jan 03](#)

Pattern: Change the metaphor

Employ a different metaphor for exploring the situation. People typically use war as a metaphor for talking about conflict. Through this metaphor, we come to expect winners and losers, offense and defense, and strategies of shock and awe. The anticipation of conflict, when positioned akin to war, makes it inevitably unproductive.

[Resolving Conflicts at Work](#) offers two other metaphors:

- **Conflict as opportunity:** Position the conflict as a problem that needs solving collaboratively.
- **Conflict as journey:** Position the conflict as an ongoing process, allowing you to “transcend the idea that you are trapped in your conflict”. “Journeys create expectations and anticipations of growth, self-improvement, awareness, and forgiveness.”

Use when:

- The language used to describe the conflict is limited to winners/losers and us/them.
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[Dec 21](#)

Pattern: Microscope/Macroscope

Force yourself to look at a situation from both a macro and micro view. It can be hard to consider a situation from multiple perspectives. Through these lenses, however, nuances of the situation reveal themselves. New and different perspective on a situation gives you an opportunity to re-evaluate the conflict, and determine whether the conflict is truly stalling a project.

Use when:

- You're having trouble seeing the situation from any perspective besides your own.
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Pattern: Pick one thing

Unpack a conflict by picking one aspect and focusing only on that. Sometimes, conflict is caused because the situation consists of many overlapping aspects. Layered agendas, objectives, problems, and requirements can lead to conflict when team members don't have clear priorities. By picking one thing to focus on, you can eliminate some of the noise, and use that to drive other problems.

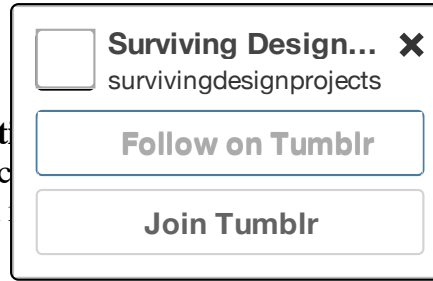
Use when:

- Performance suffers due to lack of focus.
- [1 note](#)
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- Posted at 4:24 PM

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Pattern: List assumptions

Create a list of assumptions behind the situation. Team members are making different assumptions about responsibilities, parameters, constraints, and goals. Writing a list of assumptions brings them into focus, clarifies the problem, asks questions, validate the assumptions.



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Use when:

- Team members are not performing as expected, delivering work that doesn't address the problem.
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Pattern: Draw pictures

Use pictures to communicate situations and solutions. Countless books describe the power of communicating visually, so there's no need to validate it yet again here. You can use that power to bridge the gap between people who aren't communicating effectively.

Use when you need to:

- Define the problem
- Validate constraints or parameters
- Highlight specific issues
- Establish a design direction
- Define a plan or approach
- Assign responsibilities
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