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Discussing Design

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION
& COLLABORATION THROUGH CRITIQUE

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The 10 Bad Habits That Hurt Critique

Introduction

Adam and I often are asked for tips on what can be done to avoid critique sessions becoming a train wreck. This book has covered a lot of tips and techniques for making your critiques more productive; we would like to pull out a few things to keep in mind when going into a critique. These are things that you can work on by yourself or with your team. As we have mentioned, critique takes repetition, practicing the positive things we can do as well as training to avoid the bad habits that can put hurdles in the way of good communication and positive critiques. We have identified 10 common bad habits that negatively affect our critiques; we will give a brief definition of each so that you can have them as a handy reference

REACTING

Reactions in and of themselves are not bad; we all have them. In the context of critique, when we mention reacting as a bad habit we are talking about a response that has not been thought through to what we are seeing or hearing when someone presents a design. When we verbalize or act on our initial reactions without taking time to better understand what we are responding to and why we are having the reaction we are, we put ourselves in a position to provide information that isn't helpful to the presenter.

Instead of just reacting with the first thought that comes to mind (it doesn't matter whether it is accurate), hold on to that thought and think about some questions that will help you understand what you are seeing and hearing better.

What are the objectives of the design? What elements relate to those objectives? Are they successful? Why or why not? These are all questions to think through either on your own or with the person sharing

her work. You can use the answers that you receive to compare against your initial reaction, and then you will find yourself in a place to offer informed, helpful feedback, or to keep your initial reaction to yourself.

BEING SELFISH

Giving critique isn't about telling someone what we would have created or manipulating situations to get our own way. And it's not about demonstrating to the group how smart we might be or how great our ideas are. Giving critique isn't about us at all.

But we often see individuals doing exactly these things. Offering feedback not on what has been designed, but instead commenting on what they think should have been done. This does little to help designers understand whether their designs will or won't be effective, and it does even less to keep a team collaborating smoothly.

GETTING DEFENSIVE

It can be very common to become defensive or protective over our work. Our work is our passion; our blood, sweat, and tears, laid out for others to just pick apart, or at least it feels that way. By focusing on defending our work or worrying about what we think others will think of us if there are imperfections in our designs (which there always will be), we take the focus off the product and place it squarely on us. This is a self-focused approach to critique and to design.

Critique is not about personal judgment; it is about analysis and improvement. The success of the product we are building should be the main focus; this means we need to keep the focus on the product by being willing to look at our work objectively with our teams. Analyzing what is working and what isn't will help our team know what it needs to do to ensure that the product meets its goals.

Getting defensive over our work only puts hurdles in the way of communication and collaboration. Explain your work, do not defend it. In a productive critique environment, our work is not under attack, it is being analyzed collectively so that the team and product can benefit from the insights provided.

Defending our designs can be a hard habit to get out of, but if we commit to reminding ourselves that we are working together as a team to analyze and improve them, it makes it easier explain our design decisions and gather feedback.

STARTING FROM DISPARATE FOUNDATIONS

Everyone comes into critique with their own sets of expertise, experience, and skills. This diversity in perspectives can be helpful as they can help provide us with diverse insights. We run into trouble when the core foundation underneath these expectations and ideas of what the product should accomplish are not aligned across team members and clients.

If we do not start from a common foundation of what objectives the product should be working toward, each individual might try to steer the product according to his or her own priorities. It would be like an Olympic rowing team trying to win a race while everyone in the boat is trying to row in their own direction. It's safe to say that their chances of success are limited.

For teams to have productive conversations and critiques, there needs to be a set of agreements that underpins their unique expertise and perspectives, a common understanding of the core goals to unite the team and center the conversations surrounding design.

When agreed upon by the team, items such as product goals, personas, scenarios, and principles are useful in setting a solid foundation for collaborative activities and critiques because they provide information about a desired future state and the guiderails a solution should work within to reach it.

LACKING FOCUS

If critiques lack focus, things can go off the rails quickly and make it difficult for the team to understand and gather useful insights. Critique, and more important, the participants in a critique, need structure to help keep the conversations focused and to help them understand the type of feedback they should be giving and how they should be sharing it.

By identifying the specifics that we want feedback on and making sure that the team understands them, we can avoid everyone just firing away feedback for any part of the design in any order they want.

Send out the plan for what you hope to accomplish during the critique and explain the structure that will allow the session to meet those goals. Share the work to be critiqued ahead of time as well as the type of feedback you are looking for so participants can come prepared.

If necessary, use basic facilitation techniques such as going around the room in a round-robin fashion to help keep things moving. Another useful technique is to use different lenses (ways and angles to look at things) to help draw out specific perspectives and insights.

FOCUSING ON WHAT ISN'T WORKING

So much of the time when thinking of critique, it can be easy to fall into the trap of only identifying what isn't working. This line of thinking does not capture the entire purpose of critique. Yes, we need to identify what isn't working so that we can improve upon it, but we also need to identify what is working to continue to pursue those solutions. If we see that a certain solution is working, we can possibly find use for it later in the project or on other projects because we know that it already works.

It is also important to find strengths in a design or solution so that there is balance in the critique; a good way to do this is by providing a structure for participants to use when giving feedback. An example of this would be asking each participant to identify two things they think are working in the solution and two things that cause concern.

LACK OF DISCUSSION

Critique is a dialog, an exploration and analysis of the solutions we are proposing for a certain set of problems. Critique is not a list of revisions to be carried out like a short-order cook.

To truly find out if a design or solution is on the right path, it is crucial for teams to talk about why something might or might not be working. If critique is a dialogue, this means that those giving and receiving critique need to be able to measure solutions against goals, share insights, and ask questions to ensure understanding. You can't achieve this type of dialog by a to-do list sent in an email or over chat. We need to discuss our designs.

AVOIDING PARTICIPATION

If we want to open up the dialogue during a critique and help ensure that we are getting productive participation from others, we should make sure that we are critiquing our work alongside them.

When we step around to the other side of the table (figuratively speaking) and start critiquing with the rest of the team, we begin to break down the me-versus-you mentality that can often happen during a critique and make everyone more comfortable with the conversation.

We have seen that actively critiquing our own work with the rest of the team can help them feel more comfortable with providing feedback; they are less worried about offending because you are critiquing with them.

PROBLEM SOLVING

Critique is a form of analysis. When we are participating in a critique, we are analyzing our solutions based on what we collectively understand the goals of the product to be. When we switch from analysis to problem solving, we are switching from one type of brain function to another.

Doing so, especially when a group of people is involved, can cause disruption to the discussion. Some individuals are still analyzing the original design, some are trying to understand or analyze then new ideas being discussed, and others may be trying to formulate their own solutions.

By keeping our critiques focused on analyzing the design at hand, we facilitate a better, more complete discussion. After which we can work to explore potential solutions to address any weaknesses or opportunities raised during the critique.

CONFUSING CRITIQUE WITH REVIEW

Many of us have spent time in design reviews, and they are often considered the same as critique. Reviews are not critique. Design reviews are often scheduled to get some sort of approval to move forward or go live. Most of the attendees in a design review (and there are usually far too many for productive conversations) are there to ensure that the part of the design they own gains approval and moves into the final product, and most of the decisions and approvals are tied to deadlines. This type of environment is not conducive to productive critiques.

Do not rely on design reviews for critique. You should critique leading up to the design review so that there are no surprises and so that your design reviews go smoothly.