Creating the Right Environment for Design

by Julian Jenkins

Without changes in a company's attitudes and processes, the investment in design may never pay off. Julian Jenkins identifies nine "cults" that thwart the commitment to this resource. He also outlines the qualities of a design-friendly culture and proposes seven steps design managers can take to help ensure that their contributions yield the most creative and beneficial outcomes.

Julian Jenkins, Senior Consultant, 2nd Road, Australia

The city of Sydney has been weighed in the balance and found wanting. According to a recent study by Danish architect and urban planning guru Jan Gehl, Sydney has squandered the extraordinary natural advantages provided by its stunning harbor. Instead of encouraging a vibrant, people-friendly city, its leaders have allowed a soulless urban environment to emerge, clogged by traffic and cut off from the water by major freeways and rail infrastructure. Sure, Sydney may have its Opera House as one glorious expression of design that can inspire the human spirit. However, taken as a whole, Gehl argues, the center of Sydney is not a healthy, life-enhancing ecosystem, but a monument to the culture of progress and development at the cost of human values and relationships.[1]

If the way we have built our modern cities often gets in the way of meaningful human interaction, then it is no great stretch to suggest that we have an even bigger problem with our modern business corporations. At least cities make a conscious effort to consider design, and devote substantial resources to urban planning and beautification. The same cannot be said of most

1. Jacqueline Maley, "Man with Sydney in his Sights," *Sydney Morning Herald*, Weekend Edition, Dec 1, 2007, p. 33.

organizations. The more enlightened of them may pay attention to the physical environment, creating workplaces that are intended to stimulate creativity and encourage collaboration. However, a human ecosystem consists of more than the physical environment—it also includes all the social, cultural, and behavioral elements of human interaction, the way people work together and get things done.

One organization I have worked with recently had just moved its entire staff to a shiny new campus that has won a number of design awards for its vibrant use of color, its community feel, and its resort-like facilities. Judging by the external environment, one would assume that the organization is a paragon of creative, up-front, human-centered thinking. Yet when I started to interview staff about its invisible infrastructure—the management systems and processes that enable it to operate—I discovered it was seriously dilapidated and in need of urgent renovation. Not only were there gaping holes that needed filling, and dirty windows that didn't allow for any sort of clear visibility or communication, but some of the core systems were so onerous that people had left the organization rather than continuing to live in that mess any longer.

The great challenge that will confront those who wish to champion design in business will be to grapple with organizational ecosystems that are both dysfunctional and inherently obstructive to the spirit and processes of design. To be successful, a design leader will have to do a lot more than introduce design thinking and practices to the corporate world. Erecting a shiny new building called "design" in the midst of the corporate "city" will not be sufficient if all the infrastructure and processes in the surrounding organizational environment are fundamentally misaligned. The designers in the organization may well be cut off from their natural habitat just as effectively as the office workers of Sydney are separated from their natural harbor surroundings.

How the organizational ecosystem is often antagonistic to design

Having worked as a consultant to organizations that are endeavoring to introduce design as a new capability, it seems clear to me that the real challenge for design leaders is to reshape the modern organization to create an ecosystem that is conducive to design, not antagonistic to it. The major obstacles typically encountered in the process of installing a design capability arise out of existing attitudes and behaviors within the organization that will squeeze the life out of design if they are allowed to continue unchecked. Design leaders and their organizational sponsors need to be aware that their task is not just to create a new functional area or new approaches to innovation across the organization—they actually need to undertake an entire cultural transformation.

To be successful, a design leader will have to do a lot more than introduce design thinking and practices to the corporate world.

While due attention has been paid to the differences between the left-brain, analytical thinking that dominates the corporate world and the right-brain, creative thinking used by designers,[2] there is still limited awareness of the fundamental difference in values between these two worlds, and the practical impacts of these values in shaping the organizational ecosystem. This divergence in values—and the cultural forms that emerge from them—go a lot further than the rather obvious surface differences between a design firm and traditional corporate culture (for instance. dress code, work hours, physical surroundings).

To highlight the differences, I have identified nine cultural mindsets that are endemic within the modern organization and that are enemies of design. I have called them cults, because they

2. See, for instance, Daniel H. Pink, *A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age* (New York: Riverhead, 2005).

are based on values that have some inherent validity but have become hardened into unhelpful dogmas and dysfunctional behaviors. These nine cults stand in stark contrast to the sorts of cultural values that are necessary for design to flourish:

Dysfunctional organizational cults	Design-friendly cultural environments
Cult of control and hierarchy	Culture of empowerment and authorization
Cult of performance and short-term success	Culture of learning from failure and looking for long-term outcomes
Cult of efficiency and cost-cutting	Culture of effectiveness and value creation
Cult of productivity and busyness	Culture of reflection and focused action
Cult of competition and empire-building	Culture of collaboration and shared purpose
Cult of compliance and assurance	Culture of judgment and trust
Cult of risk avoidance	Culture of possibility and experimentation
Cult of blame-shifting and arse-covering	Culture of truth-telling, of honest critique
Cult of rigorous process as salvation	Culture of heuristics and agility

The negative behaviors and work practices emerging from these cults are myriad, and are so deeply embedded with the typical organizational ecosystem as to be almost invisible. For instance, the *cult of productivity and busyness* creates organizational environments in which calendars are full and it is almost impossible to get the necessary group of stakeholders in a room at the same time to establish intent around a design project or to make important design decisions. The *cult of risk avoidance* ties new ideas up in interminable business case processes rather than letting them flourish, proliferate, and emerge into new forms. The *cult of rigorous process as salvation* insists that an activity will produce a good outcome if only the people concerned follow a rigorous procedure (which all too often means applying a set of preordained steps without having to think too hard). Designers, however, prefer to proceed with a flexible toolbox of heuristics and an agile, curious mind. They don't know yet what the outcome will be of their creative explorations, and therefore cannot define what specific steps may be required to get there.

While many values that underpin the modern corporation are expressed in subtle and informal ways within the organizational culture, in many cases these same values permeate some large formal systems and processes, compounding each other in the process. Throw together the *cult of performance and short-term success* with the *cult of productivity and busyness* and what do you get? A performance management system that rewards those staff who are seen to work long hours, achieve quick wins, and fix short-term problems, rather than recognizing the value of staff who take the time to think and play with ideas; who take on large, complex challenges with no easy solutions; and who apply a long-term, strategic view. Or allow the *cult of efficiency and cost-cutting* to flourish alongside the *cult of competition and empire-building* and you create a budgeting process where business units ruthlessly compete for scarce resources and refuse to cooperate for the wider good. Creating a design-friendly organizational ecosystem may often mean completely reshaping many of the core processes that underpin the way the organization currently goes about its business.

Being a design leader means reshaping the organizational ecosystem

If introducing design thinking and practices to an organization is actually an exercise in cultural transformation, then it is surely the role of a design leader to be the catalyst for transformation. In effect, the design leader must be willing to take on the organization itself as the object of design, not just a particular product or process. This means both actively working to reshape the underlying cultural values on which the organization is based and being willing to challenge and rebuild some of the major organizational systems and corporate processes.

For many of us who aspire to be design leaders, moving beyond what Richard Buchanan[3] calls first- and second-order design (design of language and symbols, and design of tangible objects) into third- and fourth-order design (design of systems and cultural environments) may seem like a scary proposition, especially given the size and complexity of the modern corporation. It is tempting to stay on the sidelines,

3. Richard Buchanan, "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking," *Design Issues*, vol. 7, no. 2, (Spring 1992).

to eke out a place for design on the edge of the organization and hope that somehow the design virus will flourish. However, such an approach is likely to condemn design to ongoing frustration or marginalization, as it tries to justify its existence and propagate its processes in a culturally antagonistic and impenetrable environment.

The design leader who does want to have a transformative influence on the wider organization needs to have courage and commitment, as well as a clear strategic view of cultural transformation as the ultimate goal. While the task may be a challenging one, it is by no means insurmountable. There are a number of important steps a design leader should take to maximize his or her chances of success.

1) Be selective in choosing which organizations to work with.

When an organization approaches you with a hopeful gleam in its eye and an interest in "doing something" about innovation through design, don't be too flattered or idealistic about the opportunity and rush in where angels fear to tread. Take some time to get to know who or what you will be working with, what level of openness there is to new ideas, and who wields the real power in the organization. Find out how much the organization is willing to invest in design—not just in terms of dollars, but also in terms of time and resources, particularly at the executive level. Assess whether there is any existing recognition that the organization's current core systems and work practices may well be broken and need fixing, and how widespread the appetite for change is across the organization. Declare boldly that successfully introducing design involves a significant cultural transformation and see what response you get.

2) Work with senior leaders to build strong intent and an embedded culture of design.

Cultural transformation cannot occur unless it is sanctioned and modeled from the top down. To be effective, a design leader needs the strong support of a key leader or group within the organization. Ideally, the CEO and/or board should be strong advocates for design and should be willing to embrace the cultural changes necessary for design to thrive. Where this is not possible, a business unit leader may be able to act as a voice of intent, though clearly the scope of his or her authority to implement change will be more limited. Trying to champion a design-oriented cultural paradigm shift without strong intent from within the organization is an exercise in futility; the design leader must place himself or herself strategically near the center of power and clearly articulate the vision, opportunities, and transformations required to embed a new design culture within the organization.

Of course, to be powerful, a declared intent should be matched by a strong commitment to lead by example. For design to be fully authorized as a legitimate and valued activity and as part of a company's cultural DNA, the leaders of the organization need to show the way by incorporating design thinking into their own work. For example, they should be able to demonstrate a strong awareness of where and how to use design, use a shared language about design processes, and ask good questions that reflect their familiarity with design thinking. To support this, the design leader needs to devote con-

Leading Change with an Intent Workshop

Having a key leader supply a strong voice of intent within an organization is vital, but ideally you also need to secure a wider, collective intent around any specific new initiatives or around the overall cultural change program. One effective way to achieve this is to start any new design activity or change program with an intent workshop. This involves inviting all the key stakeholders to attend a facilitated conversation, an open, yet carefully structured discussion that is intended to achieve two important goals: to create a shared view of the problem or opportunity that has paved the way for a design initiative; and to agree on the desired outcomes or vision of what an ideal future would look like. Not only does the intent workshop establish important parameters in terms of scope and specific issues that need to be addressed in the design, but it also creates a strong sense of engagement and common ownership of the problem among those with a direct interest in influencing the outcome.

siderable attention in the early stages to building awareness and capability within the leadership team and encouraging team members to apply design thinking to specific organizational problems or opportunities. At the same time, the leadership should also champion design by embedding it into key organizational processes, such as capital investment, resource planning, recruitment, training, performance and recognition, and reporting, and by finding opportunities to showcase the fruits of design thinking as signposts to a new cultural environment.

3) Be a systems thinker.

Traditionally, the sciences have applied a reductionist approach, breaking everything down into component parts, whether atoms (physics), molecules (chemistry), or cells (biology). It is only relatively recently that scientists have recognized that the physical world cannot be explained purely in terms of its parts—you must look at major systems (such as climate), recognize what drives them, and understand how complex systems interact with each other to create a whole. At one level, this involves relinquishing the illusion of control, but the payoff is in finding opportunities for insight and leverage on a larger scale.

The same shift in thinking is required in relation to the organizational ecosystem. You need to understand the systems and processes that drive the organization and suck up all its energy—and then find ways to intervene and redesign them. Recently, I was building up momentum around a new design project when it was unceremoniously stopped in mid-flight because key stakeholders were consumed in the annual budgeting/planning process. All too often, organizations expend all their creative energy on perpetuating the current system, rather than on renewing it and allowing room for innovation. Ask an average middle manager which organizational processes take up most time and feel most onerous, and you will probably get a quick insight into which systems need an overhaul. Being able to think about an organization as a series of interrelated systems, and being able to identify where to intervene to achieve a major cultural impact, is an important skill for a design leader. This may well mean pushing upstream from second-order design projects focused around a specific artifact (for instance, a project report) to third- and fourth-order projects involving reviewing and redesigning the wider system (for instance, the whole web of conversations and documents that make up the project reporting system).

4) Focus on human interactions and social processes.

One of Jan Gehl's seminal books is *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*. Challenging the architect's overarching focus on the physical infrastructure, he asserted that an important part of the urban environment is the open spaces and the opportunities for human interaction that emerge. It is tempting to jump quickly in to characterize the organizational environment as "life between meetings," but this would be to misdirect the analogy. In organizational culture, meetings are the equivalent of public space and an important opportunity for human interaction, although unfortunately they are typically devoid of any good design and therefore end up being as soulless and meaningless as many urban spaces. A more apt analogy would be to think about "life between budgets, business plans and PowerPoint presentations." Too often, organizations put enormous energy into implementing formal planning cycles and writing long documents that gobble up a huge amount of resources and pay no attention to the social processes and the quality of human interactions that surround them. Knowledge, insight, and new ideas tend to come from humans interacting in both formal and informal settings. The formal processes and documents should play a subservient, supporting role, not dominate. Creating an organizational environment conducive to design means maximizing the opportunities for human interactions, communication, and connection, and breaking down the formal structures and silos that keep people apart.

5) Exercise well-directed discipline when implementing new processes.

Discipline may not be a word that readily resonates with many designers, but it is an important part of any cultural change process. A well-directed discipline is required to prevent the habits of thinking and behavior characteristic of the old ecosystem from reemerging and smothering the new attitudes and practices of design. The law of entropy is alive and well in organizational culture change—new ideas and processes atrophy very quickly unless a concerted effort is made to ensure their longevity. The design leader, working closely with the client sponsoring the change process, needs to hold firm on key design elements during the implementation phase or all the hard work to create a new way of doing things will be quickly undone.

The importance of holding on to key design principles

I learned the value of firm discipline to achieve cultural transformation early in my career, when designing a new reporting system in a major government agency. We asked the senior managers in one major business unit to present their annual strategic reports to an executive committee using a new streamlined format, which was designed specifically to limit the amount of detail they could supply and focus instead on answering a set of key strategic questions. Uncomfortable with the relative brevity of the report and the demand for answers to specific questions, the senior managers tried various stratagems to maintain their existing habits and behaviors—such as insisting that certain questions did not apply to them, or tabling additional supporting documents to supplement the main report. But the executive committee remained firm in its commitment to the design principles underlying the new reporting format and insisted that the most important element in the exercise was having a meaningful conversation about the key strategic issues raised in the report, rather than getting lost in a sea of detail. As a result of maintaining good discipline, within a few years this process had become the main strategic planning and decision-making activity for the organization.[4]

Wherever possible, incentives should be built into the system itself or into the accountabilities of the relevant managers to provide some extrinsic motivation for adopting the new ideas. An engagement strategy should also be developed to ensure that the rationale and benefits of the new system or process is understood by those expected to use it.

6) Kill some sacred cows.

Nothing accelerates change like killing a few sacred cows. One of Jan Gehl's recommendations for Sydney is to dismantle the Cahill Expressway, an elevated road and rail connection that has played a major role as a piece of transportation infrastructure for half a century, albeit at the cost of cutting the city off from its foreshore (see photos on next page). For New York, Gehl has proposed removing cars from Times Square. Taking a dramatic step to change the existing environment is often important to show that you mean business and that the status quo is not the only possible reality. Whether it is firing a manager who does not want to embrace the new cultural environment, scrapping the current business case process and insisting that the argument for a new idea should be communicated in no more than a page, or generously rewarding an employee who comes up with a good idea, sacrificing a sacred cow can open up new and unsuspected opportunities and undermine the cynicism of those who have given up aspiring for something better.

Judiciously choosing which sacred cows to sacrifice is important—drive-by shootings or wholesale massacres are unlikely to produce a positive result! Having the support of a strong voice of intent is clearly important here, as the design leader is unlikely to be able to enforce these decisions alone. However, the design leader should be pointing the way and working with the organizational sponsor to ensure that the right moves are made.

4. For a complete account of this design process, see my article, "Information Design for Strategic Thinking: Health of the System Reports," *Design Issues*, vol. 24, no. 1 (Winter 2008), pp. 68-77.

Sydney Harbour Bridge from Circular Quay. The Opera House is on a parallel peninsula less than 100 metres to the right.

Same view toward Sydney Harbour Bridge from 40 meters further back (Cahill Expressway in foreground).

7) Help the organization to learn more about itself from experience.

One organization we worked with on introducing design was confident that it had an open and collaborative culture that would be receptive to design, and in many ways it was right—it had a better culture to work with than many other organizations we have encountered. So we proceeded to undertake a major design project and achieved some real success and momentum along the way. However, we also encountered some unexpected pockets of resistance at management level, frontline staff who were reluctant to get involved in prototyping a new process, and lengthy delays in moving from ideas to implementation. Even in the best of environments, then, there are cultural obstacles and existing processes that get in the way of effective outcomes from a design process. Sometimes, the only way to recognize that things need to change is to enable the organization to experience design, and see what unexpected obstacles emerge. The key for the design leader here is to take the time to step back from the process, to identify with the organizational sponsor which factors presented difficulties, and to work together on changing these parts of the ecosystem for the future. The design leader must ensure that the design process itself does not get blamed for less-than-satisfactory outcomes that arise from unhelpful organizational behaviors or processes. Setting realistic expectations for the timeframes required for successfully introducing design to an organization and achieving the necessary cultural alignment is also a vital part of this process.

Conclusion: It can be done

The typical response that Jan Gehl receives when he suggests a more human-centered approach to urban design for cities like Sydney, New York, and Copenhagen are initial protestations that "it can't be done here." The existing structures and transport systems seem too firmly entrenched, too monolithic. But those cities that have had the courage to believe in his ideas, and to institute change, even if incrementally, have reaped the benefits in making their city centers more accessible and attractive to people. For all its civic pride, Sydney looks enviously at Melbourne's vibrant bar and café culture, which has emerged in the wake of Jan Gehl's 1994 recommendations for that city. Transforming the organizational ecosystem may seem like an almighty challenge, and is likely to provoke similar protestations that "it can't be done here." But with some courage and a lot of faith in the power of design to create better, more human-friendly organizational ecosystems, the design leader can be a significant agent of cultural change. ■

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