Seeing Beneath the Label — Kesson-Driven Thinking for Designers

Kesson-Driven Thinking for Project Designers

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1 Seeing Beneath the Label — Kesson-Driven Thinking for Designers

If you have spent years practicing design thinking and still feel something is missing, this piece may be for you.

Empathy, intuition, iteration – you know these words in your bones. You have shipped work with them, taught teams through them. And yet, somewhere, there is a ceiling. If that resonates, what follows is a set of observations I wrote while sorting out my own body signals. This is not a proposal for how anyone should think. These are notes I made for myself, with some explanation added, that happened to overlap with what a few other practitioners were feeling. If it does not land, that is perfectly fine.

1.1 Act 1: Decomposing Intuition

1.1.1 Two signals inside “gut feeling”

Most designers trust intuition. You look at a prototype and something says “not this.” In the middle of a usability session, something snags your attention before the data confirms it.

I tried to sit with that snagging sensation and look at what was actually running underneath it. What I noticed – in my own body, at least – were two distinguishable signals.

One is a **signal that something has been overlooked – the body tightens**. The stomach clenches. The shoulders rise. I have been calling this the F-axis (F-axis, short for Fear/Fight). It is the part of the signal that asks: “Is this safe? Will we make it? What am I missing?” It sits close to survival.

The other is a **pull toward staying with something or someone a little longer**. The chest opens. There is a quiet gravity – curiosity, not urgency. I call this the O-axis (O-axis, short for Others/Attachment). It is the part that says: “I want to understand this more. I want to stay in this relationship a bit longer.”

These two run simultaneously inside the same moment you label “intuition.” Under a single word, at least two signal lines are operating. That is what I observed.

This is not peculiar to designers. An infant reading a caregiver’s face is running the same dual check – “Am I safe?” and “Do I want more of this person?” – at the same time. It appears to be a basic function of the human species.

If none of this matches your experience so far, that is healthy. This framework is something I reach for only when it is useful. It is not a lens you need.

> Donald Schon studied architects and designers at MIT, documenting what he called “knowing-in-action” – the body responding before language catches up. What he described may have been F-axis and O-axis signals running together, undifferentiated, inside a single professional reflex.

1.2 Act 2: The Anatomy of Empathy

1.2.1 Five mechanisms hiding inside one word

Empathy may be the most important word in a designer's vocabulary. But when someone says "empathize with the user," what actually happens inside the body?

In my observation, at least five distinct mechanisms are bundled under the label "empathy."

#	Mechanism	What happens in the body	F-O axis
1	Emotional contagion	The other person's feeling enters you. Your chest tightens in front of someone who is crying.	O-axis
2	Somatic resonance	Your body mirrors the other person's physical state. Your shoulders stiffen near someone who is tense.	F + O
3	Cognitive empathy	You infer what the other person is probably feeling. "She seems frustrated."	F-axis leaning
4	Holding (taking-in)	You temporarily carry the other person's emotion inside yourself. You provide a space that can receive it.	O-axis
5	Responding while keeping the self-other boundary	You feel the other person's pain while maintaining your own center.	F + O integrated

What design schools teach as "empathy" is mostly mechanism 3 – cognitive empathy. Building personas, drawing journey maps, conducting interviews from the user's perspective: these are techniques for mechanism 3.

Mechanism 3 matters. But there are places it cannot reach on its own.

When a test participant feels something they cannot put into words. When a teammate says "I'm fine" but their body is telling a different story. What your body picks up in those moments may be mechanisms 1, 2, or 4 – signals that cognitive empathy alone does not cover.

This, too, is not unique to designers. Clinical psychologists navigate all five mechanisms daily. A mother responding to an infant's cry is running mechanisms 1 through 5 at once. It seems to be basic equipment that comes with being human.

> In 1940s London, Melanie Klein watched children playing with building blocks and identified mechanism 4 – the movement of taking in another person's emotion. Decades later, Evan Thompson, a cognitive scientist who is also a meditation practitioner, described the experiential difference between mechanism 3 and mechanism 5. Different eras, different people, pointing in what looks to me like the same direction.

1.3 Act 3: Why We Cannot Wait

1.3.1 The time structure of organizations

The F-axis and O-axis are not only running inside individuals. They seem to run inside organizations as well.

Sprint deadlines. KPI reviews. Stakeholder reports. These are F-axis signals at the organizational level. "Will we ship on time? Are the numbers there?" – survival-adjacent questions dominate the time structure of most teams.

Inside that structure, O-axis signals – "I want to sit with this user's voice a little longer," "I want the team to hold this discomfort before we move on" – are frequently crushed.

Holding a question without rushing to an answer. Keeping the gap between expectation and reality open instead of immediately closing it. I call this function Withhold. Under an F-axis-dominated time structure, Withhold becomes structurally difficult.

The damage is not immediately visible. But in organizations where Withhold cannot function, something erodes gradually. Prototype quality drifts downward by fractions. Team dialogue grows shallow. Someone senses "something is off," but the next sprint begins before the feeling is articulated.

A designer's "I want to wait a little longer" may actually be an early-warning signal for the organization.

In Japanese craft traditions, there is a concept called *hisureba hana* (literally "if you conceal it, it becomes a flower") from the Noh theater master Zeami – the idea that something held back, not yet expressed, can mature into its fullest form. The pressure to ship, to show, to prove, works against this kind of patient holding. Withhold is not passivity; it is an active function that requires structural support.

> Karl Weick documented the Mann Gulch wildfire of 1949. As flames closed in, firefighters could not let go of their heavy tools. Dropping the tools – suspending the F-axis processing – and generating a new course of action appear to be the same structural challenge. Clayton Christensen's innovator's dilemma may also be a description of organizations failing at Withhold: the inability to hold the discomfort of an unproven direction long enough for it to develop.

1.4 Body Signals and a Return Question

Everything above is my observation. There is no guarantee that any of it is correct.

There is more I do not know than what I do. Are there really five mechanisms of empathy, or more? Do the F-axis and O-axis subdivide further? How can Withhold be structurally supported inside an organization rather than depending on individual willpower? All of these remain open.

If there is one thing to take away, it might be this: try sorting the two signals inside your body. "Is this fear, or is it something closer to connection?"

Here is a question worth sitting with – not one that needs answering out loud: Where in all of this did you feel "that does not apply to my work"? That specific point of mismatch may be information unique to your practice.

Kesson-driven thinking is not an answer. It is a provisional tool I use to keep from losing track of the small dissonances in my own day. If it does not fit, set it aside. No reply or feedback is needed. Take what is useful and let the rest go.

This reading is complete in itself. No response needed.

1.5 Further Reading

- **Donald Schon** – *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983). The original documentation of "knowing-in-action."
- **Melanie Klein** – *Envy and Gratitude* (1957). Where projective identification – mechanism 4 – was first described.
- **Evan Thompson** – *Mind in Life* (2007). A bridge between cognitive science and phenomenology, with lived accounts of the distinction between cognitive empathy and compassion.
- **Robert Kegan** – *In Over Our Heads* (1994). The feeling of "not enough" as a sign that a developmental shift is underway.
- **Karl Weick** – *The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations* (1993). The Mann Gulch disaster and what it reveals about holding and letting go under pressure.
- **Clayton Christensen** – *The Innovator's Dilemma* (1997). A structural account of why organizations cannot hold discomfort long enough to let the new thing grow.

These are the current coordinates of one inquirer. A bundle of hypotheses, offered as a reading.