



# DESIGN THINKING: EMPOWERD TO FAIL

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## ABSTRACT

In a world consumed with efficiency, investing in a risky process like design thinking makes for a hard sell in many organizations. However, it is design thinking that enables an organization to achieve long term success. When people are empowered to be design thinkers, they may fail, but they also may develop the next product or idea that will propel and provide future success for an organization. Organizations need both design thinkers and efficiency thinkers to be successful. Design thinking is not new, but takes extra dedication, commitment, and acceptance of risk. Design thinking from the outside may look chaotic, but it is a process that requires an extreme amount of discipline. Design thinking empowers one to fail, but it also empowers them to thrive!

**Keywords:** risk, efficiency thinking, product development, organizational change, process

# INTRODUCTION

I was in my third year of architectural design school when I learned a valuable lesson about design and what it means to be a design thinker. After spending a week of hard work on a design model, I was convinced that I had created perfection. It was the perfect design. I planned it out, spent over 100 hours in seven days designing and building it, and based on what I saw from the other students and their efforts knew my professor would agree that perfection was created. As the studio gathered together, I noticed that my professor was immediately drawn to my model. He smiled and started talking about design and how important it was to pour ourselves into our creations. He picked up my model and asked me a simple question: “How much would I be willing to sell it to him for?” Not wanting to get anything but an “A” on the assignment I said “\$10.” He gave me a twenty-dollar bill and said keep the change. He then took my model and threw it away.

Design once created is not our own. It belongs to us all in some way. Therefore, design thinking is not owned by anyone or any single organization. Design thinking is a methodology that we can all choose to participate in to obtain solutions and generate ideas that have the power to change us and the organizations that we are a part of and influence.

Giving someone the freedom to fail is not the same thing as empowering someone to fail. Freedom allows a person to choose while empowerment supports a person’s choice by encouraging and providing resources for them to take a risk, try something new, and maybe fail; but, also give them the means to be a success. There is risk with design thinking, but there is also a tremendous amount of empowerment. The following discusses the key characteristics of design thinking, efficiency thinking and how it differentiates from design thinking, positives and negatives of design thinking, when to use it, some design thinking heroes, and an example of an organization trying to save itself through a renewed commitment to design thinking.

## KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF DESIGN THINKING

To the novice, design thinking may be viewed as a chaotic means of achieving results, absent of a process, or even lacking the means to replicate or imitate from one project or company to the next. However, design thinking does follow a process, can be taught, and is transferable from person to person and from one assignment to the next. Tim Brown, in his book *Change by Design*, states that design thinking moves through “three overlapping spaces”: an “inspiration phase” where data and information are collected from all types of places; an “ideation phase” that converts inspiration into ideas; and, an “implementation phase” where the top ideas are invested in and brought to life. Design thinking does not follow a linear path with step one leading to a step two, but is more circular in its process with steps overlapping and resembling more of a quilted pattern than a straight road that leads from one point to another.

Design thinking involves all willing stakeholders in its process. Design thinkers seek input from those directly assigned to develop a solution, others in the organization, clients, and possibly even competitors. Adding value and ideas is never limited to the few for a design thinker. They can come from everywhere, but at some point, the inspiration phase needs to end, and it is the skilled design thinker that knows exactly when to move the process along to finish a design.

Design thinking is a messy process. During the ideation phase, models or prototypes that may not work fully or look ugly are often created. This messiness adds fuel to a team because everyone feels that they can pick up a model, add stuff to it, or rips things off since it is not yet sacred. The very best design thinkers fight the urge to make an idea or product sacred too quickly. By being messy, ideas have an opportunity for improvement. Once refined, it is harder to improve. Is it easier to groom a shaggy dog that has not been to the groomer in a few months or one that just left a groomer? Design thinkers just like a groomer have more to work with when things are messy, maybe even a little ugly, and definitely not finished.

## DESIGN THINKING VS. EFFICIENCY THINKING

Efficiency thinking is a powerful tool that rewards with incremental improvements in products and processes. Through efficiency thinking a car frame removes a kilogram or two of mass from one model year to the next while still meeting all of its strength requirements. Similarly, efficiency thinking may remove two or three steps from an assembly process from one year to the next. Efficiency thinking is the primary focus of many organizations. It is focused, measurable, and often yields results especially in the short term.

Design thinking is looking to make leaps from one product to the next. Discovery and transformation are the goals. Design thinkers are rarely rewarded for incremental improvements that would normally drive efficiency thinkers. When discovery is going to occur is harder to measure and requires a deeper organizational commitment to design thinking than efficiency thinking. Design thinkers have idea and product reveals. Efficiency thinkers have milestones met.

Design thinkers come to work dreaming. Efficiency thinkers come to work calculating. This is a major difference that is often evidenced by the structure of organizations themselves. Design thinkers are often grouped in multi-discipline lab or lab-like groups. Efficiency thinkers are usually organized in departments of others similarly educated to themselves. Organizations need both design thinkers and efficiency thinkers to be successful in the short term and in the long term.

## POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF DESIGN THINKING

Embracing design thinking has launched and generated amazing profits for many organizations. Apple Computer is a classic example of an organization that profits from the positive aspects of design thinking from new product designs to entire marketplaces being created. Fifteen years ago, who would have thought there would be millions of “APPS” that people would want to load and use daily on their phone? The design thinkers at Apple did and knew that it was big enough

of an idea to change the world. However, there are a few negative aspects of design thinking. First, it usually consumes a tremendous amount of time and capital resources. Second, there are no guarantees that design thinking will bring about the next new product or an idea before an organization's resources are exhausted. Third, it is hard to attract talent and stakeholders to potential when many organizations promise safety and security. Risk surrounds design thinking like a dark cloud. However, it also drives it forward and helps create the passion for design thinkers to create.

## WHEN TO USE DESIGN THINKING

Design thinking is a powerful tool that can be deployed to help an organization develop the next product, launch the next idea, and dominate a marketplace. However, design thinking should not be used all the time as it consumes a tremendous amount of resources. An organization should understand how much it can invest in design thinking and how much it cannot. Google lets everyone have a day a week to invest in their own ideas and focus completely on design thinking. Sure, they formally deploy design thinking in their other four days a week as well, but not as freely as this one day. Not all organizations have the resources to be able to dedicate this much time to design thinking. Therefore, each organization is going to have to strike a balance on how much it can invest in design thinking. An organization absent of design thinking will eventually age and die, while an organization consumed with design thinking alone will starve.

## DESIGN THINKING HEROES

Tim Brown, again in *Change by Design*, states: "It is one thing to witness the power of design and even participate in it, quite another to absorb it into one's thinking and patiently build it into the structure of an organization." Santiago Calatrava, John Maxwell, and Steve Jobs are an architect, an organizational developer, and a product innovator respectively who each are champions of design thinking. First, Santiago Calatrava creates art and beauty through structural expression in the forms and shapes of his buildings and structures. He defines space through design thinking that has inspired an entire generation to expose the structural beauty of buildings and bridges. He is not afraid to risk it all with each new design and creation. Second,

John Maxwell the preacher turned organizational developer and author showcases how he thinks through his book, *Thinking for a Change*. Although design thinking is not mentioned by name it highlights that we need to spend time each day thinking about change, how to change, and transforming our perspectives. Third, the late Steve Jobs, through product design succeeded in changing how we interact with each other and created an entire marketplace not by thinking about efficiency improvements from one computer development to the next but user interactions with technology. Through design thinking, he knew that technology was all about the users and not the computer itself.

## DESIGN THINKING: BRINGING POLAROID BACK

In the 1970s, Polaroid was the Apple of the day. Its instant photography printed on a white border is an icon that is still recognizable even though digital photography and sharing images through text has long replaced its once dominant position. In his book, *Instant: The Story of Polaroid*, Christopher Bonanos describes Edwin Land as the “in-house visionary-godhead-inventor-genius” that held product reveals on-stage and captured the imagination of an audience much like Steve Jobs would do 30 years later with the release of Apple products. Polaroid took an amazingly complex chemical and light process and designed an extremely simple to use and elegant product that captured an entire marketplace. And then it lost its connection to design and was overtaken by other ideas and products. The Polaroid of today has reintroduced design thinking into its business and is beginning to thrive again. As Christopher Bonanos has described, it has kicked out its MBAs (efficiency thinkers) and replaced them with people capable of fulfilling its rebirthed vision of designing “beautiful tools” that “capture the meaningful moments in life”. Its renewed focus on design thinking is saving the company and making it “cool” again. Design thinking propelled Polaroid to dominance for a generation and its renewed commitment is doing it again.

## CONCLUSION AND CHALLENGE

People and organizations need to employ both efficiency thinking and design thinking to accomplish success. However, it is through embracing design thinking that the future of an

organization will be shaped. By recruiting, encouraging, and empowering design thinkers to take risks and strive for the transformative and new product or idea, an organization invests in its long-term ability to not only survive, but also thrive. Empowering someone to succeed also means that they are empowered to fail. However, the only guaranteed path to failure is to take absolutely no risk and stay safe. Embrace design thinking in your organization today – your success depends on it.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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