

The Four Phases of Design Thinking

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What can people in business learn from studying the ways successful designers solve problems and innovate? On the most basic level, they can learn to question, care, connect, and commit — four of the most important things successful designers do to achieve significant breakthroughs. Having studied more than a hundred top designers in various fields over the past couple of years (while doing research for a book), I found that there were a few shared behaviors that seemed to be almost second nature to many designers. And these ingrained habits were intrinsically linked to the designer's ability to bring original ideas into the world as successful innovations. All of which suggests that they merit a closer look. Question: If you spend any time around designers, you quickly discover this about them: They ask, and raise, a lot of questions. Often this is the starting point in the design process, and it can have a profound influence on everything that follows. Many of the designers I studied, from Bruce Mau to Richard Saul Wurman to Paula Scher, talked about the importance of asking "stupid questions"—the ones that challenge the existing realities and assumptions in a given industry or sector. The persistent tendency of designers to do this is captured in the joke designers tell about themselves. How many designers does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: Does it have to be a light bulb? In a business setting, asking basic "why" questions can make the questioner seem naive while putting others on the defensive (as in, "What do you mean 'Why are we doing it this way?' We've been doing it this way for 22 years!"). But by encouraging people to step back and reconsider old problems or entrenched practices, the designer can begin to re-frame the challenge at hand — which can then steer thinking in new directions. For business in today's volatile marketplace, the ability to question and rethink basic fundamentals — What business are we really in? What do today's consumers actually need or expect from us? — has never been more important. Care: It's easy for companies to say they care about customer needs. But to really empathize, you have to be willing to do what many of the best designers do: step out of the corporate bubble and actually immerse yourself in the daily lives of people you're trying to serve. What impressed me about design researchers such as Jane Fulton Suri of IDEO was the dedication to really observing and paying close attention to people — because this is usually the best way to ferret out their deep, unarticulated needs. Focus groups and questionnaires don't cut it; designers know that you must care enough to actually be present in people's lives. Connect: Designers, I discovered, have a knack for synthesizing—for taking existing elements or ideas and mashing them together in fresh new ways. This can be a valuable shortcut to innovation because it means you don't necessarily have to invent from scratch. By coming up with "smart recombinations" (to use a term coined by the designer John Thackara), Apple has produced some of its most successful hybrid products; and Nike smartly combining a running shoe with an iPod to produce its groundbreaking Nike Plus line (which enables users to program their runs). It isn't easy to come up with these great combos. Designers know that you must "think laterally" — searching far and wide for ideas and influences — and must also be willing to try connecting ideas that might not seem to go together. This is a way of thinking that can also be embraced by non-designers. Commit: It's one thing to dream up original ideas. But designers quickly take those ideas beyond the realm of imagination by giving form to them. Whether it's a napkin sketch, a prototype carved from foam rubber, or a digital mock-up, the quick-and-rough models that designers constantly create are a critical component of innovation — because when you

give form to an idea, you begin to make it real. But it's also true that when you commit to an idea early — putting it out into the world while it's still young and imperfect — you increase the possibility of short-term failure. Designers tend to be much more comfortable with this risk than most of us. They know that innovation often involves an iterative process with setbacks along the way — and those small failures are actually useful because they show the designer what works and what needs fixing. The designer's ability to "fail forward" is a particularly valuable quality in times of dynamic change. Today, many companies find themselves operating in a test-and-learn business environment that requires rapid prototyping. Which is just one more reason to pay attention to the people who've been conducting their work this way all along. By Warren Berger Warren Berger is the author of GLIMMER: How design can transform, business, your life, and maybe even the world (Penguin Press). He edits the online magazine GlimmerSite.com.