

Seven Stages to a Design-Based Innovation Culture

A guide for in-house design teams



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After graduating from university, I got a job as an intern in a product design consultancy. This was, after all, what I had trained for and I was grateful for the opportunity to do some real work with a team of experienced designers. We worked in a small studio that was really more of an office with a plotter, a library of design books, a few quirky artefacts and some hand-drawn sketches in Moleskine notebooks. In front of screens showing CAD models were designers, informally dressed, working in silence most of the time, occasionally asking mundane questions about the whereabouts of files or exchanging constructive advice about materials, technologies and the like.

I had visited a number of architecture and product design studios by this time, and I was often struck by the lack of creative buzz in these places. There was a disappointing dissonance between what we read about and widely perceive as cultures of creativity and design, and the sober reality in such studios, which are responsible for designing so much of our material world.

I later worked in a much larger organisation that had an in-house design team. In fact it had two: a 'design and innovation team', comprising people from different disciplines and backgrounds, including myself, who were working on a range of projects and programmes;

and a 'design studio' that was part of the marketing team, responsible for the organisation's visual communications. The latter was a pretty typical in-house design team for a service organisation that was mainly responsible for crafting visual touchpoints, such as publications and exhibits. It was staffed entirely with designers and had a similar culture to the one I described above: studious, compliant and insular. Curiously, the 'design and innovation team' was characterised by team working and higher energy levels: a closer resemblance to what I like to term as a 'design culture', but which I will refer to as design-based innovation culture.

A design-based innovation culture

Culture, particularly organisational culture, is hard to define but easy to sense. It is made up of values, norms, rituals, language, social structures, material objects and environments. It is important because it is often the enabler or barrier to achieving greatness as an organisation, across a number of metrics such as efficiency, staff satisfaction and outcomes for users.

Design culture in organisations is often synonymous with innovation culture or a culture of creativity. In a recent article in the New Yorker, Apple's design team was described as having an exponential influence on the company's culture and direction. One ex-employee described the feeling of a designer joining an engineers' meeting as though the priest had joined the congregation.

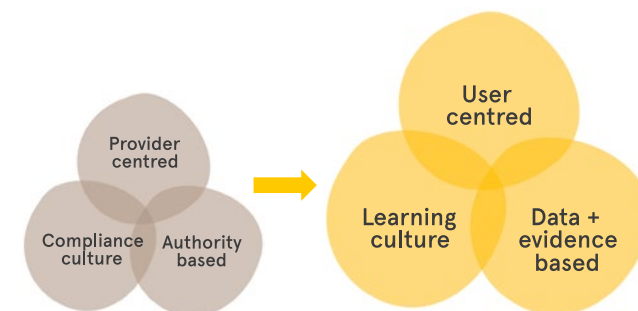
Commonly cited principles of design-led organisations include working in diverse, multidisciplinary teams, championing a user-centred approach, experimenting and reiterating, visualising and making tangible. Innovation cultures overlap to some degree with design culture and include things like risk-taking and entrepreneurship.

I have yet to see any public service leaders embrace design the way Steve Jobs did at Apple. Public services are, more often than not, governed by a culture of compliance: they tend to be provider-oriented, rather than customer-oriented and they draw legitimacy and status through their links to government and fulfilment of its targets.

Design-based innovation in the public sector

Public service organisations that are embracing design and innovation culture do not end up looking like Apple. They do not employ design gurus and do not revere their designers as sources of wisdom. Rather, designers in the public sector invert the sources of authority, culture and legitimacy to become user-centred and orientated around learning, experimentation and evidence-based practice.

For the past decade, I have been working as a service designer with a range of public- and 'third'-sector organisations. Unlike commercial companies, where growth of in-house service design capacity has been



Many public sector organisations are shifting from traditional, paternalistic administrators of public service towards more agile and creative hubs for co-production

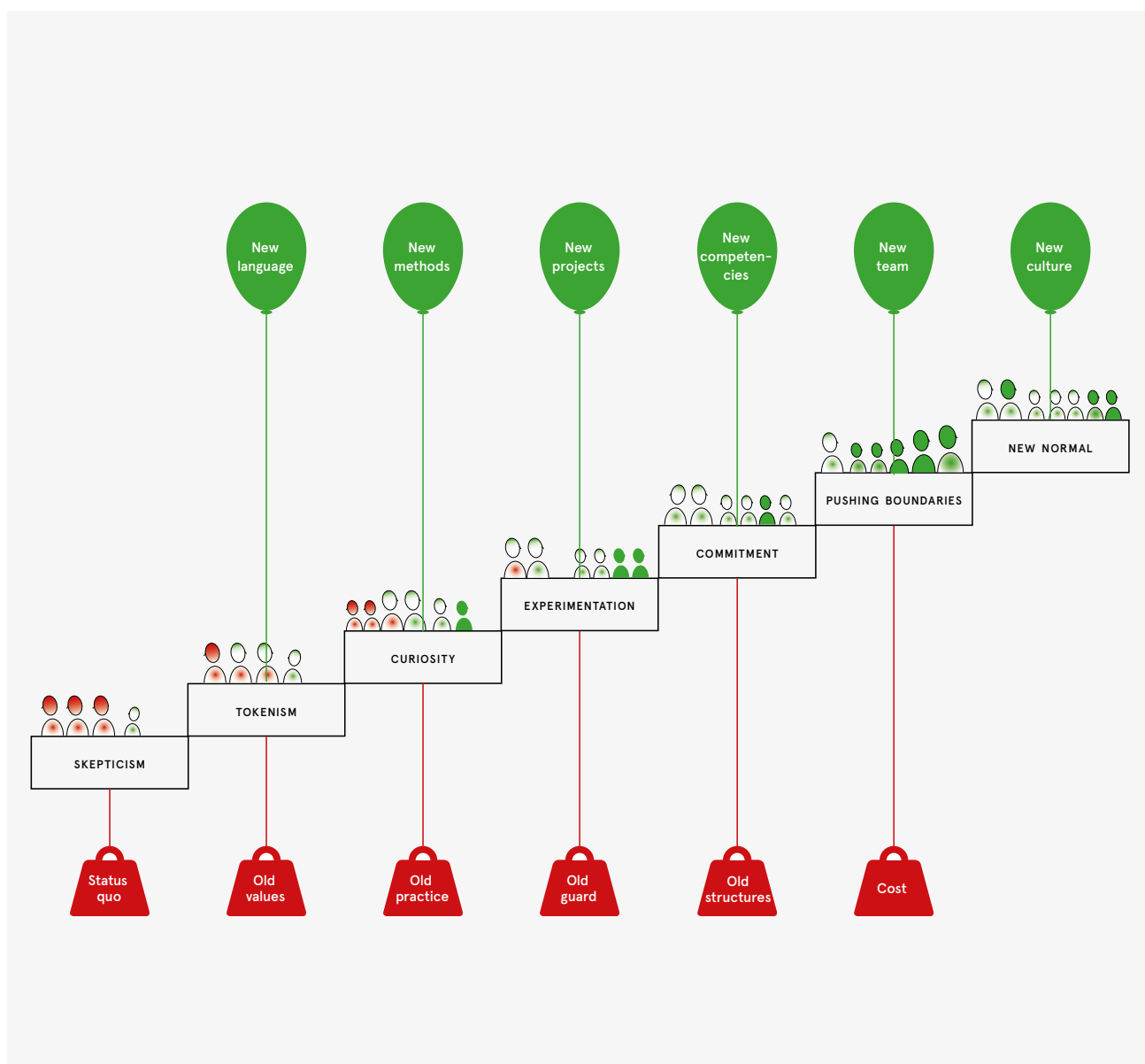
evident for a number of years, here this trend is lagging. Nevertheless, there are now more service designers, and social designers working in local authorities, central government departments, health organisations and large providers of public services than ever before.

In many cases, these are small teams that focus on specific tasks such as participatory design, user research or facilitation. In most cases, these are small teams (under five people) that are marginalised from strategic decision-making, with their value measured by output rather than impact. But, in the best examples, these teams transcend their status as delivery agents and become recognised as strategic change agents bringing about the type of culture described above.

What is exciting about the emergence of service design teams in public- and third-sector organisations is their potential to fundamentally alter the relationship between these organisations and the public. Organisations that embrace this potential, and that are not threatened by it, will grow their design teams as hubs of expertise in facilitating collaborative research and design activity across departments, involving and empowering staff and service users alongside technical experts.

The seven stages of growing and diffusing design-based innovation culture

The following table is drawn from years of experience working with organisations that are consciously building their service design capacity and moving towards a design-based innovation culture. It describes the seven stages at which organisations will typically find themselves along this journey, and suggests the activities that in-house agents or teams can do to support it.



EXISTING CONDITIONS

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

STAGE 1: SKEPTICISM

Service design is seen as 'fluffy' and peripheral, there is no in-house design capacity, no understanding of the value that designers can add to current organisational activity and a limited understanding of user-centred service development processes.

Build awareness and confidence by introducing key concepts and sharing stories and evidence of the impact of human-centred, design-led processes by other organisations. Measure your success by building senior managers' curiosity to invest resources in a limited and safe way to test new ways of working.

STAGE 2: TOKENISM

People use terms such as 'design thinking' and 'co-design' and use Post-it notes liberally (but not always effectively). Design thinking is more of a fashionable veneer used by managers wishing to display a level of sophistication than a new practice.

Reinforce the importance of adopting new ways of thinking and working to tackle complex, persistent challenges. Build awareness of the mismatch between the organisation's design-devoid practice, and its use of the language of design-based innovation. Help leaders to identify ways of bridging this gap in a way that adds integrity to the organisation's mission and strategy.

Measure your success through senior leaders' desire to invest resource in testing new ways of tackling organisational challenges using service design methods.

STAGE 3: CURIOSITY

There is curiosity among senior leadership about the value that service design methods and processes can deliver and some resource has been allocated to test its viability.

It is important to invite external design professionals that have the experience and confidence to confront internal skeptics and introduce new, evidence-based practices that are demonstrably different to existing ones. Make sure that any new project has clear objectives and success criteria that were agreed by senior leadership.

Often, during this stage, we find growing opposition by some members of staff to spending precious resources on non-conventional practice. Adopting a user-centred design process and prototyping new solutions can be profoundly threatening to professional orthodoxies and existing power structures.

Use your resource to run a demonstration project that involves colleagues alongside service designers, to tackle a real, live challenge. As a minimum, you could organise a service design 'sprint' for colleagues who want to learn and experience a new way of working. This could range from a 48-hour hackathon-type event to a week-long residential course, during which colleagues' time is fully dedicated to this project.

Measure your success through a growing desire by colleagues to adopt service design practices in their work, as well as an appreciation of the value that professional, expert service designers and innovation facilitators bring to this type of work.

STAGE 4: EXPERIMENTATION

There is growing curiosity and acceptance of the value of service design practice among staff at all levels. Managers and leaders would like to see more capacity in-house, rather than develop a dependency on external consultants.

Build legitimacy for a small group of internal change-agents to grow their knowledge and skill in facilitating design-based innovation projects. Do this by identifying and inviting internal change agents, who are open-minded and respected professionally to join a new community of practice that is focused on achieving significantly better outcomes through innovative practice. Invite them to participate in service development projects alongside external service design partners.

Measure your success through the enthusiasm and capability of internal design 'intrapreneurs' to facilitate research and co-design projects and advocate for designers' involvement in future work.

STAGE 5: COMMITMENT

There is a recognised team of internal 'service design champions' who spend some or all of their time on design-based innovation projects. However, there are barriers to this team working effectively:

- There is no clear leadership or boundary that defines who can or cannot lead an innovation project.
- There is no adequate physical space for innovation projects, and insufficient design skills, software and resources.
- Few members of the team are experienced service designers or have any design training, and they pull the practice in different directions, leading to a generalist and non-distinct practice.

Connect the innovation team with service design and other relevant communities of practice through conferences and knowledge sharing activities. Help team members to adopt and disseminate a shared language around design and innovation, such as those developed in the UK by the Design Council, Nesta or Policy Lab. Work with your human resource team to develop an organisational competence framework for innovation that will align skills and knowledge with recruitment and promotion of staff.

Measure your success through the growth of in-house service design capacity that has a clear vision and strategy, and whose skills are aligned to broader organisational needs.

STAGE 6: PUSHING BOUNDARIES

The organisation has an in-house design-based innovation team and a senior design leader who sets direction and advocates on their behalf. There is a pipeline of projects and there are attempts to measure the value and impact of the team in order to sustain their activity.

However, the success of the team becomes its own enemy: as it grows and becomes more expensive it increasingly focuses on justifying its existence rather than the impact it seeks to create.

Keep the size of your team small, and build a diffuse network of advocates across the organisation. Do not be afraid to involve external consultants and experts, as well as internal colleagues from different departments, even if it is easier and cheaper to do things yourselves. Promote the role of the team as an inclusive hub of design-based innovation activity, not an exclusive one.

Measure your success by building the sustainability of your team, ensuring that project budgets significantly outweigh your staff budget. Refine the success metrics of your team to ensure it focuses on outcomes and experiences of users, as well as economic and social sustainability.

STAGE 7: NEW NORMAL

Leaders, managers and staff from across the organisation see themselves as instrumental in a design process. Designing with users and communities is the norm, and there are known roles within the organisation that include a range of design specialists, researchers and facilitators. Internal indicators are used to monitor areas such as collaboration, creativity, distributed leadership as well as performance and outcomes.

Organisations that have embedded design culture laterally and have an in-house team of design experts that support a range of innovation processes are energy-rich and closely attuned to their users and communities. Sustaining this culture is difficult and rests on leadership that honours the principles and culture of human-centred, design-based innovation.

Why this matters

My perception of how designers should work and why design matters has changed over the years. I was trained in a 20th century school of design that celebrated 'good design' through form and function rather than experiences and impact. But I have always believed in design's social impact potential, or at least its moral intent as advocated by a long tradition of thinkers (and doers), from Ruskin and Morris, through Gropius and Eames, to Papanek and Manzini. Today, I find a growing number of designers working in public service and social innovation are building an authentic, 21st-century interpretation of this tradition. Whether these designers are employed in-house or otherwise matters less than whether design is embraced as a culture, as well as a set of skills and competencies across organisations. I believe the coming years will see a growing correlation between impact, efficiency and design-based innovation culture across all public services.