

Design Thinkers think like Managers

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Well... maybe this title is too provocative. Yet, the inspiring article of Karin Lindgaard and Heico Wesselius is an eye opener. I was reading its final lines and I was left with a warning sign. What if we are substantially wrong? What if the way we are bringing Design Thinking into the classrooms of business schools and into organizations, is jeopardizing both design and management, instead of lifting them up?

The article takes a peculiar perspective. Looking at design thinking as a cognitive stile. It offers a script of the evolution of theories of cognition, and then it connects them with design practice. The part that I like most is the first one, which illustrates an overview of cognition theories. Thanks to development in neurosciences, there is an increasing interest in cognition, and design is not immune to it. Lindgaard and Wesselius eventually focus on the role of emotions, and, from the broad body of knowledge of cognition theories, they borrow the concept of “sense of fit” or “felt-sense”.

“Rather than treating emotion as separate from rational or higher order thinking, this approach identifies emotion with unconscious processes that guide complex forms of behavior. [...] feeling emerges—initially as the sense of how well an action might meet the demands presented by the situation. This is feeling a “sense of fit.” [...or also...] our “felt sense” of a situation. This felt sense is always present, even if we are not actively attending to it. Cognition has two sides—this felt sense, and symbols. Symbols are explicit expressions, such as language or images. [The felt sense functions to *select* the symbols that *explicate* a meaning]. This is how we have a sense of what to say next, or how to proceed in any situation. Often we only know that something is missing or not right, and as we attend *to this feeling*, we consider alternatives. Our knowing when something is not right or not finished, even if we do not know why, is one of the most tangible ways of noticing our felt sense.

It's an intriguing concept because it captures a fundamental way in which design practice occurs. It reveals as an intimate feeling for a direction, which then leverage on the capability to give form to this feeling through visualization and prototypes (sketches, stories, maps, mockups), and then again a “felt sense” that these visualization may or may not be good. And so on iteratively: a new visualization through appropriate symbols, and a new “sense of fit”.

The second part of the article tries to elaborate on this perspective: how the concept of felt-sense applies to design practice? And here is where the reflection loses its depth, compared to the rich elaboration of the cognition theories done in the first part. The application of the concept of “felt-sense” to the nature of design stays on the surface. It seems that Lindgaard and Wesselius have an intuition, a very good one indeed, but then they stopped there. Well, it does not matter anyway, because the direction they are pointing to is promising: they leave much space to dive deeper. For themselves, or for others who want to contribute.

The key message is: if we leverage on cognition theories, we can better capture an essential ontology of the practice of design. Designers (as other disciplines by the way, such as artists): (1) use the deepest level of cognition, the “felt-sense” to drive their exploration of innovation; and (2) easily move from this “felt-sense”, which reflects a rich yet implicit understanding of a situation, to a symbolic representation, which reflects the explicit manifestation of a situation. They have the capability to tap on the most sophisticated dimension of our understanding, and make it explicit, and viceversa. They create a short-circuit between implicit knowledge (where most of new understanding occurs first) and

articulated knowledge. And this circulation between the two is the fundament of learning and innovation, in individuals and in communities (Nonaka, I. and Takeuchi, H., *The knowledge creating company: how japanese companies creates the dynamics of innovation*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1995.).

Lindgaard and Wesselius bring a theoretically grounded understanding on the unique capabilities of designers, in a world where the myths about the superpowers of designers are abundant. We have heard of designers as catalysts, as integrators, as system thinkers, as leaders, or, as mentioned in the article, the designers as capable of being empathic with the user, most of which are not based neither on empirical or theoretical fundamentals, and are far from how designers are educated. Lindgaard and Wesselius instead focus on two cognitive abilities, that are deeply rooted on how designers are educated (or at least on how they used to be educated): Designers (1) are not scared of using their guts (their felt-sense) to drive their exploration, and (2) have the skills to give form to the guts (of themselves and of others).

Managers do not have these skills. In their Schools founded on analytical (and system) thinking, they are repeatedly told not to trust their guts. And they have very poor skills to symbolically represent implicit concepts.

Hence, the supposed power of bringing design to management: to compensate the skills of managers with what they miss.

And here is where Lindgaard and Wesselius throw a heavy stone in the shallow pond of how Design Thinking is brought to management.

Because the way Design Thinking is most frequently framed rarely leverage on these cognitive skills (felt-sense and the aesthetic of symbolic meaning). It is actually, often in contrast.

To make Design Thinking palatable to the world of business, most advocates of “Design Thinking” have articulated and “packed” design into a set of clearly articulated processes and methods (5 step processes, double diamonds, brainstorming, quick ethnography, empathy maps, customer journeys, blueprints). This enabled to bring design closer to the language and palate of business schools. But by doing this they have eradicated the cognitive core of how Designers think. Missionaries of Design Thinking for business have done everything they could to tell managers what managers wanted to hear: that design is not a matter of guts, or “felt-sense”, but a matter of process (the word “process” is repeated dozens of time in the famous IDEO shopping cart video). They have done everything they could to tell that “symbols” are irrelevant: you can build whatever goofy prototype you want – the aesthetic dimension of which does not matter.

To make Design Thinking digestible to managers, it has been lobotomized: guts-free, aesthetic-free. And this lobotomy succeeded to engage managers. They loved it, so analytic, so procedural, so controllable. Guess why...

The stone Lindgaard and Wesselius throw in this pound makes a crashing noise and a big wave. “The Emperor wears nothing!”: it is not management that moved close to design; it is actually design that moved close to management.

The cognitive perspective of this article shows that this lobotomy may end-up endangering the discipline of design twice.

First, are managers scared of the ambiguous, emotional, intuitive side of design? Are they scared of the guts? Let’s expunge the “felt-sense” from design. The consequence is that designers themselves have become extremely procedural. They are losing the trust in what is their most powerful cognitive capability.

Second, do managers miss skills to sophisticatedly play with the meaning of symbols (images and prototypes). Let’s expunge aesthetic as a relevant dimension for innovation. Let’s say that any prototype is fine regardless to its symbolic meaning. Perhaps in front of a prototype you will “feel” that something is wrong, but no worries: it’s normal. Prototypes in Design Thinking have no aesthetic and

symbolic meanings. The consequence is that designers themselves are losing the appreciation and deep skills for sophisticated aesthetical representation and reflection.

Lindgaard and Wesselius send a warning sign: through this double lobotomy we may disavow some of the most advanced cognitive capabilities of designers.

The irony is that management itself, in the search to move beyond its limitations, is trying to emancipate from analytic thinking, and is moving closer and closer to the power of bodily and emotional cognition. There is an increased attention, in management (and especially in leadership) to new findings in neurosciences. Behavioral economics have central attention in business schools. Emotional intelligence is a taking a big chunk of leadership courses. Business Schools are less scared of the guts and are sensitive to advances in cognitive sciences about the power of intuition.

The irony, and the risk, is that not only the lobotomy of the “felt-sense” and aesthetic in design is making Design Thinkers think like managers; it is making them think like managers of the past.