Influence by Design

Influencing others to take a new approach is an inherent — yet often problematic — leadership challenge. Despite the broad application of Design Thinking's customer-centric tools and frameworks, my colleagues and I have discovered that there is an untapped opportunity to use this mindset in a new way: to increase influence.

Fundamentally, design thinkers start from the customer or user's perspective, rather than assuming they have all the answers. Early in my career, I consulted on the reorganization of a pharmaceutical plant in Puerto Rico. On the way home, the senior partner on the engagement, Frank, turned to me as we leveled off after takeoff and asked me what I thought had gone well and what could have gone better during the meeting.

He agreed with my general observations, but then Frank asked me what I thought of the exchange I'd had with Juan, a senior manager at the plant. I said that we'd come to a good outcome on the redesign of his unit. Frank replied, "You would have made a good trial attorney. You used your arguments to back Juan into a corner, but you didn't change his mind. You'll need to take another tack to gain his backing for the change." It was a hard lesson on the difference between gaining compliance versus gaining commitment — and a vivid example of the power of taking another person's perspective when you need to influence them.

Influence actually works quite simply. My colleagues and I have captured the dynamic in an equation: I=P/R. Someone is moved or **I**nfluenced by increasing **P**ersuasion and decreasing **R**esistance, or more often a combination of both. If I were seeking to influence someone's behaviour or perceptions around an organizational change, I might share the benefits of the new structure (increase persuasion) or perhaps demonstrate how past practices won't work going forward (decrease resistance). My success in influencing would likely hinge on whether in making my case I had correctly identified 'hot button' examples for that individual. All too often, influence fails because the case made is not relevant enough.

This is where two key principles from the realm of Design Thinking can help: customer-centred design and **IDEO**'s three lenses of innovation.

Often, we believe we know exactly the right thing to say to someone in order to shift their perspective. We can marshal a litany of bullet-proof arguments — any one of which we think should instantly convince the other person to abandon their current views and see things our way. And that is precisely the reason why our influence efforts fail: We expect others to see things *our way* rather than approaching the issue from *their* perspective.

My colleagues and I have found that leaders rarely consider the interests of both parties when communicating. They reflexively focus on their own interests and what they want to convey. Put simply, leaders default to broadcasting their message rather than to engaging in dialogue.

This is not simply an advocacy for two-way communication — even though many leaders would benefit from listening more than speaking. This is the practice of the first principle I mentioned above: customer-centred design, or '180° thinking'. It entails first approaching the communication from your point of view, and *then* from the other party or audience's point of view. Here's how to do it.

UNDERSTAND THE AUDIENCE'S AGENDA. A simple tool we have developed called the Audience Agenda helps you quickly explore both parties' interests. To use the tool, divide a piece of paper into two columns by folding it in half or drawing a line down the middle. In the left-hand column, list the main points you want to convey. Then, look at the same topic from

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your audience's point of view and in the right-hand column, list what will most likely be on their mind about the topic. Finally, compare the two lists and weight your communication heavily towards responding to the right-hand column. Unless and until you address your audience's concerns, they will pay scant attention to what you have to say.

It's important to add a note of caution here: Simply listing your initial thinking about what you want to convey and what you think matters to your audience is a big step forward. But to be even more effective, you will need to refine the content from the audience's frame of reference. That means selecting content relevant to your audience's frame — not your own.

BEWARE THE CURSE OF KNOWLEDGE. When we attempt to influence based on our own thinking, we are subject to the tyranny of the left-hand column — or put another way, to the curse of knowledge. In knowing the conclusion that we have reached on the topic, it is difficult for us to take the point of view of someone who doesn't know the same things or who hasn't reached the same conclusions. Our arguments therefore serve to reinforce conclusions that we have already reached. Unless we intentionally get into the other person's frame or adopt their perspective, we are unwitting prisoners of our own perspective.

EXPAND THE FACTORS YOU CONSIDER. We can all benefit from an approach that widens the aperture of our thinking and prompts us to consider a broader set of ideas. This is where the second design thinking principle can help: IDEO's three lenses of innovation. In brief, for a design to have value, it must be viewed through three lenses: desirability, feasibility, and viability.

I will use the example of the **Apple** iPod to illustrate. First, a design must be *desirable*: it must meet the custom-

er's needs in a way that is attractive. While no one was asking for the ability to carry a thousand songs in their pocket, once this became a possibility, customers not only wanted to make the step up from carrying around CD players, they wanted tens of thousands of songs. Clearly this was a desirable design.

Second, a design must be *feasible*: we must be able to create the offering. Advances in small hard disk storage capacity, eventually in solid state memory, and in music file compression made storing more music possible (even without our current streaming technologies). Finally, the design must be *viable*: we have to be able to produce the offering at scale and at a reasonable profit. Global sourcing and production allowed Apple to produce the music player at an accessible price.

While these three lenses can be applied to addressing the robustness of a design, they are equally applicable to the robustness of an argument or influence approach. Applying these perspectives, we can expand the range and relevance of information we'll share to either increase persuasion or decrease resistance.

THREE WAYS TO INCREASE PERSUASION. Identifying ways in which your position is potentially desirable is likely the easiest and most readily accessible case to build. After all, if your position doesn't have any attractive aspects, you're apt to be trying to convince yourself it's a good idea! Your position might be attractive for myriad reasons, and these are often the bullet points that populated the left column in your first pass at the Audience Agenda. Considering how the position is feasible prompts us to look at the relative ease of implementation, the match with existing or readily acquirable capabilities, or the relevant experience we can tap into. This may include demonstrating alignment with the business or operating model. Viability builds on the feasibility

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elements to show that the position is scalable and sustainable over time. In a business context, this frequently involves the financial model.

Identifying persuasive elements may be relatively straightforward, though considering all three lenses will likely bring to light less obvious attractive elements. Moving from how we increase the numerator in the I=P/R equation to how we decrease the denominator requires deeper consideration.

THREE WAYS TO DECREASE RESISTANCE. Resistance takes two forms: a reluctance to disrupt the status quo and essentially do nothing different, or the merits of pursuing the course of action you advocate rather than an alternate option. The case you make will differ depending on which of these forms of resistance is at play. If the alternative is maintaining the status quo, desirability centres on the relative advantages or benefits; feasibility may focus on how your proposal is easier in the long run; and viability may look at the comparative upside or marginal contribution of your proposal, or how the proposal may be instrumental in positioning the organization for the future.

If the alternative is another option, you are likely to face the twofold challenge of demonstrating superiority through all three lenses relative to the competing option, as well as addressing the merits of departing from the status quo. If you don't pursue both sources of resistance, you will likely end up having eliminated the competing option but still not moving away from the familiar.

In closing

Using the principles of Design Thinking to improve the approaches we take to influence others may have an unexpected benefit. When Juan and I next met, I apologized for the earlier exchange, then asked about the concerns he still had about the proposed redesign. He understood the arguments I'd made, but was concerned the redesign would compromise strides his team had made in improving operations. His resistance arose from a concern for the plant overall, rather than sheer obstinance. After exploring alternatives, we landed on a new and better proposal — and greater commitment to the change.

By more thoroughly exploring the other party's perspective and considering what will resonate with them, we gain a more robust and nuanced understanding of our own argument — both its strengths and its potential weaknesses. Ironically, this design-thinking influenced exploration may result in us altering our own perspective — to being influenced while we seek to influence. The unexpected benefit we receive may be greater confidence that we are on the right path, or just as valuably, a recognition that we should reconsider our position. In either instance, we'll be better off. *RM*

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