Designing Better Management: A Call For Socio-Cultural Frames In Design Thinking

“Design thinking” promises a path to sustainable innovation, but its discourse lacks a clear understanding of both culture and political economy. These gaps threaten to thwart the fruitful realization of design thinking’s promise. Writers such as Roger Martin (2009) from management and Tim Brown (2009) from design typify the discourse of design thinking. As exemplars, they both demonstrate clear lacunae around culture and economics. Specifically, Martin (2009) calls for managers to embrace the intuitive, adductive logic of designers, while keeping an analytic lens to ensure profitability. Brown (2009), meanwhile, exhorts managers to be more collaborative with co-workers and more observant and more attuned to cultural norms of their end customers.

As Dean of the Rotman School of Management, Martin exemplified “convergence” in his recent presentation at the Ontario College of Art and Design. To a mixed business and design audience, Martin gave a brief overview of his book and explained that some organizations are better able to embrace “design thinking,” which he defines as the ability to think both analytically and intuitively. He pointed out in his presentation and in his book that 20th century corporations have perfected the analytical frame of mind, but fail continuously to embrace the adductive leaps of logic that innovation requires.

Audience members repeatedly asked how to equip their organizations to embrace design thinking. Martin advised designers to “empathize” with their analytical peers, and business managers to “empathize” with their intuitive colleagues. What cultural norms support or thwart such empathy? What cultural practices signal empathetic ways of being? Such cultural aspects are critical in understanding truly sustainable innovation and organizational change.

Neither Martin nor Brown adequately explains what specific organizational conditions lend themselves to such empathy and observation. Both fail to offer a robust framework for understanding either the socio-cultural or the political economic dimensions of innovation and organizational change. Simply describing design thinking in action does not explain how and in what ways it flourishes. To truly embrace design thinking as a management tool, designers and managers must develop two new intellectual lenses: an awareness of culture and a framework for power relations. The discourse of design thinking, then, must reach beyond “management” or “design,” and into sociological realms.

Awareness Of Culture

Design-thinking organizations likely exhibit consistent, patterned behaviours, which could be summarized as their “culture.” Culture is defined simply as “collective subjectivity” (Alasuutari, 1995), or, more poetically, “man [sic] is an animal suspended in webs of significance, he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs” (Geertz, 2000, p. 5). In other words, culture is the aggregate of symbols and codes we use. It is the “shared artifacts” that form our collective consciousness (Stahl, 2006). Culture is simply everyday life, our “ways of thinking,” and the symbols we use to represent those ways of thinking (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008; Ashkansay, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000).

Cultural context helps determine whether innovation succeeds or fails. An innovative product will surely fail if its consumer finds it distasteful, shameful or otherwise culturally dissonant. Through anthropological methods, consumer culture theory (CCT) aims to understand consumers’ cultural norms and encourage the embedding of such norms within the product or service (Arnold & Thompson, 2005). Such a frame is critical to the success of a new product or service, yet many proponents of design thinking often fail to offer clear explanatory frameworks of culture itself, instead suggesting that simply “observing” consumers will suffice.

But a perhaps more pernicious gap in design thinking is its lack of insight into organizational dynamics. Innovation occurs within particular organizational contexts. The cultural dimensions of an organization’s innovative capacity often remain unarticulated within management case studies because they are frequently not the direct unit of analysis. Neither Martin nor Brown, for example, offer a definition of culture, much less an analysis of its dynamics within innovative organizations. Importing their case studies wholesale into entirely different organizational cultures could result in outright failures as a result. What ways of thinking preclude thinking of products as answers to customer needs? What everyday activities make it impossible to create substantially new products or services?
CONVERGENCE: Managing + Designing Position Statement

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There are, in fact, theories for understanding organizational culture. Schein (1985), for example, describes organizational culture as artifacts, values, and tacit assumptions. Design-thinking organizations indeed must have values, which implicitly valorize the empathy and adductive logic of design approaches. Kluckhohn (1953) offers a robust theoretical framework for categorizing all cultures along value lines. Organizations, tribes, and even nation states can be understood in terms of five core values: time orientation, social relations, activity, human nature, and human-to-nature. Every culture demonstrates values along these five axes. How does a design-thinking organization map to this framework? What values do design-thinking organizations exhibit? What values do they explicitly reject? How and in what ways do design-thinking organizations establish and reinforce these values? Using socio-cultural theories such as Kluckhohn’s would serve to better explain design thinking.

Political Economic Context

Innovation also occurs with particular economic contexts, yet we know little about economic features of design-thinking organizations. Organizations must grapple with the material constraints of having finite resources. What are the political economic practices of design-thinking organizations? It is currently unclear how organizations that practice design thinking allocate resources. This is a remarkable gap, given that how deeply resource allocated affects organizational function (Clegg & Kornberger, 2005; Kallenberg, 2001). How do design-thinking organizations negotiate time and space? Contemporary capitalism has transformed both space and time, thereby constraining the choices organizations can make (Harvey, 1989). Publicly traded corporations, in particular, have distinct structural pressures to offer short-term “results” of profitability. How do design-thinking organizations deal with short time horizons and external pressures to demonstrate profitability?

Another feature of contemporary capitalism is industry conglomeration, which is particularly noticeable in industries such as media (Mosco & McKercher, 2006). Smaller organizations face the very real constraint of competing with larger, more established organizations. How do design-thinking organizations grapple with such competitive pressures? Is it possible for smaller organizations to compete, given such conglomeration?

We currently lack both a political economy of design-thinking organizations, as well as an understanding of their cultural practices. Design thinking as a promise is inspirational, but for it to offer real change within organizations, it must be understood as well as management innovations of the past century, such as Six Sigma or lean production. There are currently gaps in this understanding, which management scholars and designers must endeavour to fill.

REFERENCES