

# Design Leadership

What does it mean to lead a design business? Design leaders guide organizations in planning and fulfilling desired outcomes for their clients—and they grow their designers in the process.

But the real definition of design leadership, however, is quite blunt: **Design leaders make awesome s%#t happen.**

Leaders at a design business may not be the ones in charge of the day-to-day client management, project management, accounting, bookkeeping and other activities that require deep focus on operational management, but they will always touch those facets of the business, ensuring they support the quality of the creative product. Hartmut Esslinger, founder of frog, put it best: “When we have a ‘concept’ and people smile, we take the next step. When there are questions, we go back and try harder.”

## ***What traits does a design leader need to succeed?***

A design leader is not the same as a design manager. While managing people may be the most important thing that any design leader does, it isn't the only thing that a leader needs to worry about.

There are a series of traits that define every design leader. How these traits manifest in the day-to-day work flow of a design organization govern the ways in which the organization develops over time. If design leaders aren't fully aware of these traits, they can wreak havoc in a smoothly functioning organization.

### **HAS AN UNQUANTIFIABLE “SECRET SAUCE,” WITH VISION AS ITS BASE INGREDIENT**

Design leaders come in many flavors, but vision is the most important ingredient in how they work with others. Along with vision, a delicious mixture of a leader's innate character, education, talent, hobbies, passions and loves oozes from his every interaction with others. This secret sauce can often be powerful enough to help ensure the quality of the company's day-to-day creative work, as well as the overall strategic direction of their firm and its client businesses.

### **CONNECTS HER VISION TO AMAZING IDEAS FROM HER TEAM**

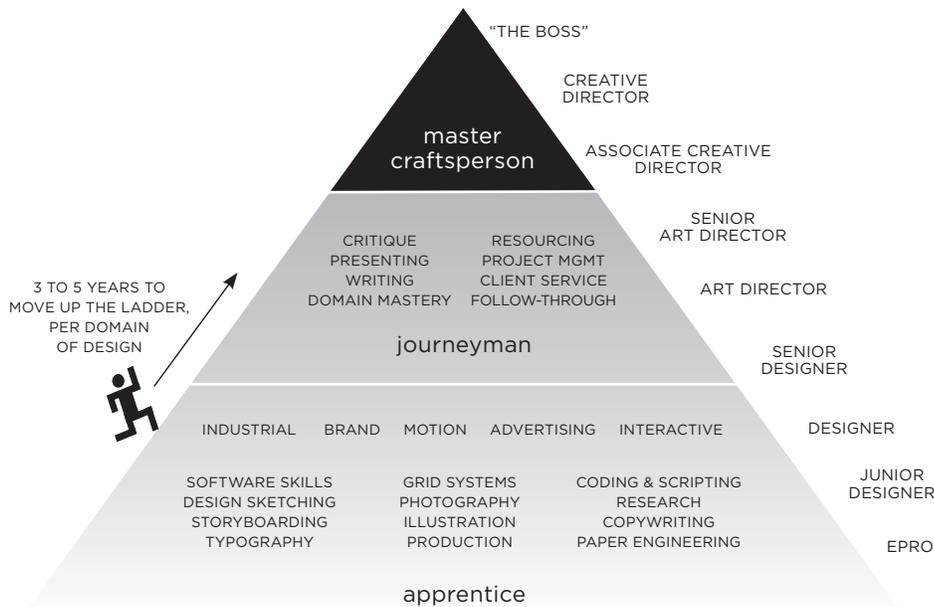
Evidence of a design leader's secret sauce is most present in how she expresses and encourages ideas from her team. A design leader can, within a few seconds at a whiteboard or at a computer, powerfully articulate why these ideas are connected to a stated vision—no matter who suggested that vision. To quote Pelle Sjoenell: “No one works for a creative director. Everyone works for the idea. The idea hires us, and we go to work.”

### **ENJOYS WORKING WITH DESIGNERS AND CLIENTS—AS PEOPLE**

A design leader must love working with his clients and staff as people first. In many ways, the people are the leader's work. Leaders must nurture relationships and stoke passions that often live outside the day-to-day work. If you don't help your colleagues realize their potential as people, you may just be a manager of projects.

### **FUNCTIONS DAILY AS A BEHAVIORAL PSYCHOLOGIST**

As you hire talent and grow a firm, you need the full range of people, from planner to visionary, to force the necessary creative friction that leads to great work without pissed-



***Being a design leader requires you to become a master craftsperson in your domain of practice.***

During this journey, you'll gain hard skills as an apprentice designer (such as use of software) and soft skills as a journeyman (such as presenting).

off employees. To encourage this sort of atmosphere, leaders need a strong “emotional quotient.” This means you are able to perceive the emotions of yourself and others around you. This aids you both in understanding what motivates people’s behavior and also in using that information to better support them. A true design leader helps everyone care about their work and feel like they have a reason for being there.

**UNDERSTANDS HER OWN CREATIVE DISPOSITION AND THOSE OF HER TEAMMATES**

Does a designer’s creativity emerge from the right lobe of the brain, where lightning continually strikes to create an inspired design solution? Or does the creativity move methodically from the left lobe of the brain, where beautiful design solutions are honed until the designer achieves a polished sheen? Design leaders know how to adjust their language and approach to interact with these different dispositions, facilitating the appropriate level of discussion and creating the necessary space for success.

**SEES FROM MILES TO MICRONS**

A great design leader travels from the 50,000-foot view, with a full understanding of where projects and clients should be traveling, all the way into the tactical nuances, such as poorly kerned type or a missed detail in a design comp. Along the way, she distills what she sees into effective, actionable perspectives for her clients and teams.

**ABLE TO FIGURE OUT WHY, OR TRIES**

A strong design leader must be able to frame his creative vision in the context of sound business strategy—or collaborate with a client to reshape that strategy. This requires an understanding of how design activities (and vision) can delight customers and earn a profit in the process.

### **COMMUNICATES UP, DOWN AND SIDWAYS**

A design leader does not need to be present for the creation of every design deliverable. However, she needs to communicate upwards, to her bosses and her clients. She also communicates sideways, to leaders and managers on her level and to their peers in project management, client service, development and other domains. And, of course, she needs to clearly communicate down to the people she manages.

### **FOSTERS PROJECT OWNERSHIP AMONG PEERS AND CLIENTS**

If a design leader doesn't give his team enough space, the members of the team won't grow. A strong design leader will calculate ways in which his staff can own key pieces of projects without oversight. He'll also be cautious in how he delivers feedback, careful not to train a generation of order takers. To quote the businessman Tom Peters: "Leaders don't create followers, they create more leaders."

### **APPLIES STEADY, CONSTANT PRESSURE**

A good design leader is invested in outcomes for everyone in her organization. She applies pressure at the right points in a project to propel the team forward. She is willing to tell everyone that the work isn't good enough (yet), and in worst-case scenarios, how to rethink the entire approach. A design leader should be honest regarding trade-offs, compromises and other elements of a given design direction that seem illogical or less than ideal. At the same time, she should use those moments of honesty to help identify what new opportunities may exist that could lead to excellent work. If a leader isn't direct about these issues early enough in a project, she will ruin her own credibility and risk mutiny.

### **THE SIX C'S OF CREATIVE LEADERSHIP**

Much like a kung fu disciple, who must climb the tall mountain peaks in order to find the secret dojo where he can learn a particularly rare fighting style, many design leaders must mature in their craft before they can realize their leadership skills under the right mentor. Some of these skills are not easily teachable. They are behaviors that a design leader must infuse into his daily work habits.

At the same time, a design leader must be aware of the same skills and behaviors she is trying to grow in the people that she manages. These behaviors, which serve as a concise summary of what we've discussed in this chapter, are as follows:

Leaders **conjure** compelling design work in their own right, when pressed into service.

Leaders **communicate** actively, with rational and emotional intelligence. As a result, co-workers and clients want to communicate with them.

Leaders **coax** stellar work out of their teams by creating space for creativity to flourish. This space is protected, so incursions by clients or organizational politics do no harm.

Leaders **compel** their teams to realize a vision, no matter who suggested or informed that vision. The best leaders know how to suss out internal motivations as encouragement, rather than external pressures.

Leaders **cajole** through critique, by asking the right open-ended questions at the correct time to encourage the flourishing of great ideas. The leader can also choose to hold her tongue, allowing other people to lead.

Leaders **cheer** their teams on, both within a design organization and publicly by promoting their work. Leaders should inspire through endless enthusiasm and engagement. To quote designer Brian LaRossa, "Earnest interest and excitement can be a contagious remedy for low morale."

## **IS BRAVE AND ALWAYS WILLING TO TAKE RISKS**

In our lightning-fast culture, many great ideas can be realized in a matter of weeks. Taking risks is the only way to assure that your idea reaches the world first. As Andy Rutledge said: “Risk takers get first choice. All others can pick through the scraps.”

However, risks should be taken with the proper information at hand. What sacrifices may be required of your team? What sacrifices might you have to make as well? And can you be an effective leader if you make them? All of this should be assessed before sprinting for the prize.

## ***How can I learn to be a design leader?***

There’s no “one true path” to becoming a design leader, no clear checklist you can follow to become one in ninety days or less. But when I coach other designers on how to acquire stronger leadership skills, I ask them the following questions, which help them begin designing their journey:

### ***What hard skills do you still need to learn?***

Is your growth path hobbled because you haven’t mastered a basic skill? Can you not sketch an idea on a whiteboard or build a competent slide deck for a client presentation because you don’t know how to use PowerPoint? These are everyday skills that need to be in your arsenal, no matter what.

### ***Who will help you gain those skills?***

Do you work with people that have the skills that you need? Can they teach them to you? If you can’t teach yourself, don’t be afraid to reach out to those around you for help.

### ***What domains of design do I need to add to my portfolio?***

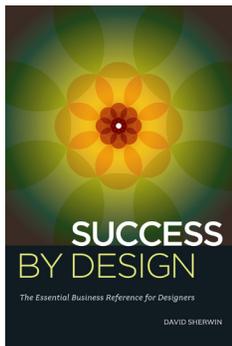
While it’s important to have a deep competency in at least one domain of design—whether it be brand, interactive design, industrial design, or advertising—design leaders need a view across a wide range of domains. What domains are adjacent to what you enjoy and would help you have a more holistic understanding of design?

### ***What “soft skills” do you need to acquire?***

Soft skills are what differentiate designers from design leaders. Business writing, public speaking, the ability to read a room, compelling storytelling—these skills come from practice and the active mentorship of other leaders.

### ***What ingrained behaviors might stand in my way?***

If you hate standing up in front of people and speaking, you can’t go to Toastmasters and expect to improve instantly. As people, our behaviors are very slow to change. It takes constant attention to adapt, but in time, we will be rewarded.



Excerpted from *Success by Design: The Essential Business Reference for Designers*, out November 2012 from HOW Books