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Collaborative-Design:
A Different Approach to Work

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CO-DESIGN: DEFINITION & ORIGINS

Explaining Co-Design isn't easy. It's one of those things, like going to a concert, conquering a mountain peak or taking part in an exhilarating sport, that has a quality which is lost when put into words. Yet the experience is often profound and can have long lasting and transformative impacts on the individuals and systems involved.

Put simply, Co-Design is a method and process of working together to achieve shared outcomes. It involves a journey of collective understanding, contextualization, discussion and work in order to generate new insights and a more holistic understanding of the problem faced. Participants change the way they look at things and this changes what they see. These new collective insights are used to vision, explore, co-create and rapidly prototype solutions through working iteratively and collaboratively. Participants quickly go through multiple iterations of work, informed by open and honest feedback, scenario testing and design challenges.

PURPOSE & BENEFITS

A key aim of co-design is to create a space for participants to have profound learning experiences, challenge stereotypes, form individual and collective identities, and develop new and innovative ideas through exploring the cultural, social and political perspectives of their respective mental models and world views. The specific activities in a Co-Design process are usually custom and created for the purpose and context Co-Design is being applied to.

Most people discover Co-Design because their current approach to the problem they face is no longer working, and/or isn't optimal. They are stuck and need to do something fundamentally different. Co-Design offers a solution.

KEY BENEFITS

- **Alignment and ownership of a route forward:** going beyond buy-in because people have had a hand in creating the solution and have a vested interest in ensuring its success. People love what they design and own what they create.
- **Acceleration:** achieving "months of work in a matter of days" through accelerating feedback cycles and compressing meetings that are spread over months and years into a matter of days.
- **Optimization:** co-design enables participants to think and work differently because it can be hard, and some argue impossible, to solve problems with the thinking that was used to create them.
- **Risk mitigation:** through uncovering the risks, issues and differences in opinion early on so they can be designed around, instead of a project uncovering them once it's in delivery.
- **Creativity and innovation:** fresh thinking and new dimensions of human performance can be achieved through drawing on the collective intelligence and variety of perspectives in the room.

DEFINING ATTRIBUTES

'Co-Design' is different to 'negotiation,' which is typically a discussion aimed at reaching an agreement; and where the discussion is conducted by third parties, such as lawyers and advisors. Co-Design interventions are run by a neutral facilitator, who has no vested interest in achieving an outcome for a specific party. Their aim is to achieve an overall outcome for everyone involved.

Harnessing collective intelligence requires active participation from the groups involved in both the problem and the solution. This is a fundamentally different approach to an expert designing a solution for or with a client. During this process, it is the participants make design decisions and trade-offs, together, instead of 'conceding' on points in order to 'win' on others. The practitioners and participants work together in partnership to create new solutions.

Co-Design harnesses the collective intelligence of a group, recognizing that there are many things that can be created through collaboration that cannot be created by any one individual. The diversity of both the participant group involved and of the perspectives in the room is seen as key to ensuring rigor and resilience in the solutions that are created.

Co-Design typically happens in events over three day periods, so that the participants have the opportunity for two sleep cycles to consider the problems and solutions at hand. Some events are shorter, lasting one or two days in duration, and others are much longer, lasting weeks and, in some cases, even months. Those who are experienced in Co-Design events understand and recognize the value of three day interventions. A key mistake many make is trying to reduce the process down to a shorter duration without understanding why the process is designed in the way it is.

Co-Design events bring together four key elements which aim to overcome the political, rational and emotional barriers that exist in any room:

1. People Who Participate

Co-Design events don't work with people simply attending; instead, people actively participate in the process. Unlike a typical workshop or conference, where the people in the room can be passive and listen to what's going on, Co-Design events demand a lot of every single person who engages in them. They work best when people are present: physically for the entirety of the event; mentally, so they are focused on the problem at hand; and emotionally, recognizing that most changes humans go through aren't an easy experience. For a successful outcome, Co-Design events typically have a representation of all stakeholders involved in the problem and in the desired solution. Numbers of participants range from fifteen to hundreds and even thousands. A cross section of roles and perspective to ensure that 'requisite variety' exists in the room is key to ensuring the rigour and resilience of the solutions created.

2. Equipped with Right Knowledge and Content

Specific content inputs are used in Co-Design events to provide both richness of ideas, as well as ensuring decisions are made based on the available evidence. Content is typically carefully curated and framed to eliminate cognitive bias as much as possible. A wide variety of sources are typically used and either shared through presentation, read individually or worked on in small teams. Knowledge also comes from the participants themselves. As they often live the problem and solution on a day to day basis, they have both experience and knowledge of the topic.

3. In a Collaborative Environment

Co-Design events recognize that the environment conversations happen in fundamentally impacts the type and style of conversation and work product outputs that result. As an example, the simple act of sitting around a table can foster confrontation whilst sitting in a circle can facilitate a more open conversation. The use of large whiteboard work walls is common and environments are usually highly flexible.

4. With a Rigorous Facilitation Process:

More time is typically invested by practitioners in the definition and design of Co-Design events than in the delivery of the events. Practitioners often work with a small sponsor team to define the event (outcomes, objectives, key questions that are aimed to be answered) and then design the work that needs to be done (modules of work, the process, the assignments, the team lists of who works together, and the content inputs.)

Models are often used prolifically in the definition and design, where models are a 'slice of reality' to help understand the situation and context that the practitioners and participants are operating in.

Part of the discovery stage of the design process involves the definition of the decision-making structure and principles by which decisions will be made.

Every Co-Design event is a unique response to the context, problem and participant group. The planning for Co-Design events typically starts six to eight weeks before the event. A Sponsor Team, consisting of both leaders and operators from the different stakeholder groups involved, is formed and works in partnership with the Co-Design practitioner(s.) There are typically three to eight people on the Sponsor Team, depending on the number of different stakeholders.

There are two key activities that unfold in Sponsor Meetings before the session:

1. Event Definition

The first step is to establish a shared context and understanding for the situation. Often the different members of the Sponsor Team see their situation differently and the aim of the practitioner is to help everyone generate a holistic and rich understanding of the situational context.

Together, the team then define the purpose of the event. This is captured in specific objectives, the key questions that the event is aiming to answer, the content inputs and the participants required to answer those questions. The scope and boundaries of the event, including any non-negotiables and givens are discussed and articulated.

2. Event Design

The practitioner uses the definition to design the event. The design is an iterative journey of testing drafts with the Sponsor Team and using their feedback to improve it.

An example of one of the many models used is Scan-Focus-Act and it is prolifically used to structure three day events:

Scan, Day One: Asks the question *"What do we need to know?"*

This goes broad and wide, exploring content both directly related to the context and, metaphors and ideas adjacent to it. It is typically a playful and exploratory day where participants' thinking is stretched and their creative potential unlocked. At the end of Scan there is a holistic understanding of the situation and the problem.
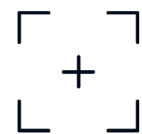
Focus, Day Two: Asks the questions *"What could we do?"* and *"What should we do?"*

Focus starts to explore what potential solutions could look, feel and be like. Ideas are rapidly prototyped and tested. Design challenges push participants to the edges of what's possible and work goes through multiple iterations based on feedback. In doing so, participants generate a strong level of shared intent for finding a solution to the problem and temper this intent with insights on what will and won't work. At the end of Focus there is strong collective intention, insights and emergent possibilities for a route forward.
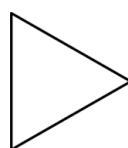
Act, Day Three: Asks the question: *"What will we do?"*

Act is where possibilities turn into realities. Practitioners open up space for a rigorous collective discussion on what ideas need to be worked on and taken forward. The group themselves define the work that they need to do. Whilst Scan and Focus are heavily led by the practitioners, in Act the participants and Sponsor Group step up and begin to drive the work, with the practitioners creating the framework and environment for it to get done. The day is highly iterative and the different strands of work carefully integrated to ensure a coherent solution is created.

Each of these days will consist of modules of work that roughly last between 20 to 120 minutes. These modules include:

- Presentation of information for people to gain a shared understanding: large group lectures and panel style presentations are rare. Typically, information is shared more organically and intimately with conversations or 'chat-rooms' for small groups with de-briefs that combine the participants own experiences with the knowledge they gain
- Participants working individually
- Participants working in small teams of four to eight people
- Participants sharing the work that they've done, either individually or in teams, to ensure shared understanding, join up what's going on and get feedback to iterate their work with
- Large facilitated conversations with the whole participant group

Modules link together, often in a non-linear fashion. The experience is like a polaroid photograph: when it first comes out of the camera it's blurry but over the course of the three days it gets clearer and sharper. A module on Day One could link to a module on Day Three and the participant group may never realize the link.

Modules of work are 'self-facilitated.' In the event, the teams or individuals are set an assignment to complete by the facilitator and then given space in which to complete this assignment: with the content inputs they need readily available. The facilitator and their team check that the teams are progressing and intervene as required. However, interventions are kept to a minimum to ensure that the team are driving their own work and therefore have ownership for it.

When working with the Sponsor Team the practitioner(s) will typically produce a logic flow that outlines the purpose, outcome and key questions a module is aiming to answer and use this to iterate with the Sponsor Team. Some practitioners go into the detailed design and process of the modules, others do not. It depends on the practitioner and the context they are working in.

The experience of Co-Design events is profound and has a value that cannot be captured in a summary such as this. The above is intended to provide an overview in absence of such an experience.

Discovery Days are the first step:

Why?

A Discovery Day allows you to get a taste of a genuine Co-Design process while unpacking the key problems that might be keeping you awake at night.

What do you get from a Discovery Day?

Those involved will have the opportunity to use the Co-Design process to gain further insight into challenges facing your system and the organizations and communities that are a part of it.

When you bring key stakeholders together for a professionally facilitated Discovery Day, you will:

- Unpack your challenge and clarify its nature and impact on your business/community
- Develop an enhanced, shared understanding of the challenge and its true scope
- Identify the key elements of the challenge and the objectives you need to achieve to address them
- Determine what options are available to you to achieve these objectives
- Develop alignment and intent to solve the problem