

Team Emotional Intelligence in Design Thinking Process

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This is a conceptual paper that explores the importance of building Team Emotional Intelligence. It uses the processes in a Design Thinking approach to build the relevance of Team Emotional intelligence. Design Thinking offers new approaches to problem solving and is increasingly becoming a tool used by organizations to drive innovation and achieve break-through strategies. A shift from the decision attitude, which involves choosing the best alternative from a given set of solutions, Design Thinking (DT) is about creating new solutions. The designers immerse themselves in the user's experience to understand the articulated and the unarticulated needs as well as the expressed and the unexpressed emotions. Design Thinkers ensure that the right question is being addressed.

The design process is a collaborative one, where multi-functions, disciplines and stakeholders work together in addressing the issue. The dialogue during the process on the one hand involves persuasive argumentation and on the other, it should foster commitment amongst the stakeholders. While various ideas are being explored to bring in different aspects of the design problem, the designers need to be open to new experiences, show empathy to not only the customers needs, but also to each other. The designers should be able to let go of their own ideas and allow new alternatives to arise.

This would require a high degree of Team Emotional Intelligence, which not only creates an emotionally safe environment for designers to freely express their ideas and emotions but also not loose their position in the team. Effective management of Conversations is integral in this process to ensure that appropriate action is taken for successful implementation.

Keywords: Design thinking; emotional intelligence; team building; interpersonal relationships;

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INTRODUCTION

Businesses today are facing pressure for continuous innovation and to offer products and services that go beyond just immediate functionality. Business managers are now required to create futures and deal with the 'unknown', the environment today has become highly chaotic and unpredictable. In such a scenario, mere quantitative methods and analytical techniques are no longer enough to predict future outcomes. Business managers today face 'wicked problems' that have no clearly defined solution spaces (Rittel and Webber 1973). The root of leaders and managers to be mere decision-makers seems to be a failing of management education to address the changing dynamics.

Managers are typically trained to have a decision attitude towards problem solving- which is traditionally choosing from a given set of alternative solutions. It assumes that a rational choice needs to be made from a given set of alternatives, using tools such as risk assessment, economic analysis, multiple criteria for decision-making and others. Due to this untenable assumption in the decision attitude that the alternatives present also include the best ones, it may lead to an early closure of the problem, restricting the managers from exploring new solutions that may, in fact, significantly impact the consumer experience. Rational decision-making which has been critical so far, no longer satisfies the changing conditions.

In this scenario, design thinking is slowly emerging as a new approach to problem solving and for enhancing managerial behaviors. It seems to carry with it the potential of filling the gap between analyzing existing alternatives in a given solution space to creating completely new ones. Many businesses today are adopting design thinking and are bringing in a design perspective to problem solving. P and G also conducts organization wide Design Thinking workshops that aim to develop their managers to think like designers. Business schools are aiming to introduce design thinking in management education.

A design attitude searches for the best possible answers, given the time, resources and skills available. It starts with the assumption that the best solution lies in inventing a new alternative altogether. In other words, it is how designers approach problem solving. It begins with a more holistic approach- including understanding customer needs, social factors, the end user's experience, emerging trends etc., and looks beyond the immediate problem to ensure that the right question is being addressed. A DT process uses interdisciplinary teams, uses and leverages on different paradigms, to generate insights and news ideas. The Design process requires the designers / managers to immerse themselves in the user's experience, to understand the articulated and the unarticulated needs of the consumers. The design process is a collaborative one, where multi-functions, disciplines and stakeholders work together in addressing the issue. The dialogue during the process on the one hand involves persuasive argumentation and on the other, it should foster commitment amongst the stakeholders. While various ideas are being explored to bring in different aspects of the design problem, the designers need to be open to new experiences, show empathy to not only the customers needs, but also to each other. The designers should be able to let go of their own ideas and allow new alternatives to arise.

The process would require not just high individual Emotional Intelligence but also a great degree of an evolved team, with a positive emotional climate and high Team Emotional

Intelligence. This paper explores Team EI not just in a Design process, but also the importance and relevance of building the same within an organization. We explore certain processes that take place in a Design project and locate Team EI within these.

UNDERSTANDING HOW DESIGNERS WORK

We draw upon Robert Bauer Ward M Eagen's work (Bauer 2008) conceptualization of how designers work and his Epistemic Plurality modes model to understand the process. Designers approach problem solving from the solution space, rather than merely analyzing the various available alternatives. They start with the end desired state and then work their way back to what is double. Bauer suggests that designers move in three stages- starting with in the grounded lived reality (Understanding the problem), moving into the virtual world, led by imagination (Imagining) and finally returning to the lived world, with new possibilities at hand (Building).

In the first movement, Understanding, design agents *immerse* themselves in the user's experience, which enables them to understand the user's actual expectations or problems as well as the articulated and the unarticulated needs. In simpler terms, they aim to see the world through the user's eyes. Once they have a grasp of the same, they *redefine* the problem, focusing efforts to uncover the deeper, underlying problem. The redefined statement may in fact seem different from the earlier problem statement. The stage of redefining is also grounded in Systems thinking. In this movement, the design agents moved from the lived world to the virtual. In the second movement, Dreaming, the design agents remain the virtual world, using *Imagining* to generate new ideas and are engaged in the quest for newer alternative solutions. It is in this movement, that the designers also use *Opting*, to make decisions. The third movement, Building, sees the design agents back in the lived world, where they use *Prototyping*, to develop the best ideas. It finally ends with *Presentation*.

It is suggested that Design Thinking is more epistemically plural than analytical thinking, as designers move between the psychological functions of Thinking, Feeling, Sensing and Intuiting in each of these movements. For a design process to be successful, the design thinkers immerse themselves in the user's experiences and view the world from the user's experience. This helps them understand the actual needs (expressed and the unexpressed) of the user. While the initial problem statement may be redefined, the newly defined statement also has to resonate with the design agent. In the Imagining stage where the design agents create alternatives, they do so by relating it to their own experiences. Prototyping takes place in the final stage of building, where the designers present their ideas and are open to outside influences and feedback.

From the above, it might seem that designers are creative geniuses, who work in isolation to others. However, successful designers work in collaboration with the customers and inter-disciplines within the organization, imagining the world from different perspectives (colleagues, end-users, clients), which requires Empathy. (Ref- Brown's Personality Profile of a Design Thinker). In reality, they understand the culture of their own organizations and its connection to the outside world and the various businesses they serve. They keep the big picture in mind and redefine the problem statement, revisiting the finer details and engage in constant dialogue with others involved in the process.

INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAMS IN DESIGN THINKING

Integral and Experiential Intelligence in design approaches:

Kevin Clark and Ron Smith, in their paper, *Unleashing the power of DT*, share the example of a cross functional team (corporate experience design, systems and technology design) coming together at IBM, to study the out-of-the-box experience of newly delivered IBM systems. This group included professionals from engineering, finance, human factors, industrial design marketing. This was a group that would normally not work together and continues to collaborate after the project concluded. This suggests that a community can be built across professional borders and is important to design thinking.

They further talk about Integral and Experiential Intelligence in design approaches. 'Integral Intelligence is the ability to bring together diverse customer needs and business ecosystem capabilities into complete ecosystems'. It requires the designer to keep the big picture in mind, while paying close attention to the details. It involves the constant re-engaging with the imagination (theirs as well as the imagination of others on the team) to see the complete picture and most importantly, the use of details and its connection to the bigger picture. In other words, Integral Intelligence helps businesses to see the larger picture.

Experiential Intelligence is the ability to understand and activate all five human senses to make innovation tangible and vibrant'. Designers use experience elements (immersing in the user's experience) and apply this interaction knowledge. Kevin and Ron suggest that this endeavor is too large for a single department. They further suggest that professionals engage in conversation with each other to make this entire process robust.

It seems that Integral intelligence would require designer to be open to feedback and the ability to regulate emotions. Experiential Intelligence requires a great deal of empathy and an ability to be open to outside influences.

Creative Collaboration in DT

Kaiser in his paper *On the Design of Creative Collaborative* (Kaiser 2002), discusses design as a creative collaboration and the impact on design when communication breaks down between the people creating something new. He talks of Mind Reading as a form of collaboration, which demands close proximity and intense communication. Such form of mind reading sometimes does not even require full sentences to be spoken.

I have observed this kind of Mind-Reading very often during team building training programs and team building activities. During an experiential learning program, specifically in the outbound training program, I have often seen different groups approaching the same activity in a unique manner. While some teams are able to solve an activity very quickly, some others from similar backgrounds are unable to do so. This approach is not driven by the technical backgrounds or the expertise of individuals on the team. In fact, very often it seems to be driven by the highly open communication channels that exist within the team.

Teams that have been in existence for fairly longer duration, have a certain awareness of each other's emotions and of each other's thought processes, enabling them to work well with

each other, while others, usually newly formed teams, grapple with creating the comfort feel, before actually tackling the issues at hand. There is a certain emotional safety and an emotional understanding, which enables these teams to successfully accomplish tasks.

Kaiser also discusses *Conceptual Blindness*- the tendency of people to cling to their own ideas. While some of this may be attributed to ego states, at play is also a kind of Conceptual blindness, which may be caused by people being possessed by their own visions of the world and an inability to see any other perspective. Once a person creates an image in their own ways, it becomes difficult to see the same image from another's perspective, unless it is broken down back to its abstract elements.

Persuasive Artifacts

Sten Johnson (Johnson 2002) draws upon the concept of Persuasive artifacts (communication objects that carry conviction for the design of a particular solution, inviting others into dialogue, stimulating their imagination....) and asks the pertinent question of how design that involves many kinds of experts takes place. Arguments for a design solution will have to appeal to multiple and contradictory values.

Once an idea has been made public, the speaker loses control over its meaning (problem of persuasive artifacts). There is a zone of ambiguity which leaves the hearer to make their own interpretations. Even if the speaker can influence the choices, the zone of ambiguity will always exist. There is certain 'subjunctivity', as the meaning of a narrative is somewhat undetermined and open to contribution by others. In a design process, this implies that the dialogue should be able to work out the differences in the narratives, to give a joint meaning to the discussion.

Sten also talks of speakers losing or gaining position on the team, which may cause them to move towards the periphery. Once a position is lost, these speakers are under observation. On the other hand, some other speakers may take up a central position and be seen as 'Constructive Contributors'. They are generally trusted to speak on behalf of the team.

This kind of losing position on the team can be very detrimental to the team's overall performance. It may not only impact on some of the ideas being lost, but also create a certain tension in the team.

I have observed this during an intervention that was carried out for a leading manufacturing company, in the business of auto spare parts. The intervention carried out, was for the interdisciplinary team to work together, to set targets and develop a plan of action to create Centers of Excellence within the organization. During the three day off-site, it was observed that two of the members present, who in fact represented the leadership team of the organization, tended to dominate the discussions, not giving the newer entrants the opportunity to complete their ideas. Each time a new entrant or a member from the junior teams presented an idea, the leadership team would start sharing their own experiences or failures in executing a similar idea in the past. Due to this, by the end of the day 1 of the program, some members completely stopped participating in the discussion, not giving voice to their ideas. In addition, it also created a tension between the members.

This brings an important and pertinent question of how does an interdisciplinary team, transcend the underlying complications, to work out their differences and yet arrive at a consensus? The collaborative processes clearly bring with it hidden complications: how does a design solution be arrived at with experts from various disciplines working together, bringing with them individual values, perceptions and interpretations? There are multiple communities, with sometimes contradictory values, to persuade. Specialized knowledge only adds to the complication. Potential conflicts may arise. In the case of these conflicts not managed well, some members in the group may feel that they are losing position on the team. Emotions in the team have to be managed well, for effective collaboration to take place. I suggest that the group's Emotional Intelligence and the overall Emotional Climate may offer some explanation.

TEAM EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Team Emotional Intelligence goes beyond co-operation, participation and commitments to goals by all team members, to include active management of each other's emotions. A team comprising of highly emotionally intelligent people does not necessarily mean that the team is Emotionally Intelligent.

An Emotionally Intelligent team creates Trust, a Group Identity (a feeling that they belong to a certain worthwhile group) as well as Group Efficacy (a belief that they would work better in this team than individually).

The emotional climate of the group is actively managed to include features of Team Empathic concern and creating norms. Climate perceptions determine how the team behaves collectively and influence perceptions about certain events. This in turn influences the propensity of actions.

I draw upon the work of Druskat and Wolff (2001) who posit that emotions have to be regulated, and norms created, at 3 levels- Individual, Group and Outside the Group. Some of these have high relevance in the DT process.

Individual Level Norms

At the individual level, norms are created for Interpersonal Understanding and Perspective Taking. Interpersonal Understanding would involve 'getting to know one another' and creating an environment where members can freely express their feelings. Perspective taking involves everyone in the decision-making process. An effective perspective taking approach would be for members to see each other grappling with perspectives of others! Both these norms have relevance in the Creative Collaborative process as well in Persuasive artifacts. The Conceptual blindness that occurs may be addressed during perspective taking, while individual member's watch each other struggle to understand the various ideas presented. This will give each member present an opportunity to appreciate the thought processes of their team members. In addition, it may also give them an opportunity to appreciate that a lack of understanding sometimes leads to an idea being rejected. Moreover, it is the idea and not the person who is rejected.

Mind-reading will take place when there is a deep interpersonal understanding of the teams. An awareness of each other's emotions as well as openness in discussing the same will go a long way in a team's effective functioning. Members are 'genuinely open' to ideas from others and make sure that in the case of an idea being rejected, it is accepted gracefully.

For both Interpersonal Understanding and Perspective taking to be effective, teams also create norms for Confrontations and Caring. Confrontations done in a playful manner and in an emotionally safe environment will help point out when a member steps out of the line or to bring notice to erratic behavior. This might offer an understanding of how the group ensures that no one on the team fears losing position and also feels safe to offer ideas, which they know will not be shot down at face value.

Group Level and Outside Group Norms

Group level norms include seeking constant feedback from the outside world, self evaluation and creating resources for working with emotion (expressing acceptance of member's emotions, a time for venting out frustrations...). Outside group norms includes an organizational understanding- not only if the final outcome is in keeping with the overall goals of the organization, but also the culture of the organization.

A closer look at the Integral and Experiential Intelligence process would reveal the use of these norms, where the teams constantly re-engage with the imagination of others on the team, rework the details, while keeping the big picture in mind. This would involve an understanding of the outside world (Integral Intelligence) as well as require the members to experience from the user's perspective.

Implications for Further Research

I suggest that building Team EI is important and in fact, crucial not only in the design process but also for an organization to be more effective. It becomes even more relevant in the context of Managing as Designing, where managers in an organization should be trained to think like designers. 'Designing is too important to be left to designers alone!'

It is further suggested that tools to measure team EI be developed and the impact of conversations on the team be studied in more depth, especially during a change process. Implications for management is to start developing and creating an awareness of EI as well as actively manage the emotional climate and the perceptions of its teams. It needs to go beyond just team building exercises and activities to bring in the emotional element more strongly. Implication for research is to go beyond just understanding how emotional climates are developed, but also to find solutions that will have practical application and be easy to implement. A deeper understanding of how EI can be effectively integrated in the design process is important. Further research is required to possibly create and develop training programs. Also, on how organizations can effectively bring in design in functions where the emotional element is high- for example, the Recruitment process, in Employee engagement and brining about institution embeddedness. Also, further research is required on exploring others areas where the application is high.

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