

By Lee Fain

Are you thinking of bringing a design department into your business? Do you deal on a regular basis with design consultants? Here are some ideas for making that relationship a productive one.

Designers in the Hands of a Passionate Leader

A person with short blonde hair, wearing a pink sweater, is seen from behind, sitting at a desk. They are looking out a large window at a cityscape. The scene is brightly lit, with a strong lens flare effect from the sun or a light source behind the person, creating a warm, golden glow. The background shows a blurred city view with buildings and a body of water.

HAVING THE PLEASURE OF SUPPORTING WONDERFUL design leaders who are passionate about the value they bring to their organizations has inspired me to give a few words of encouragement to those who might be new to managing designers. I have held roles within large multi-national organizations that involved making uncommon connections for the purposes of innovation, fostering open-mindedness across functions, and developing new perspectives that encouraged novel collaborations and influenced the design of elegant solutions.

I've learned that design management is more than just designing specifications for the latest product launch, making inspirational presentations, reviewing artwork layouts, rendering the latest design, or managing external creative agencies. The overall management of design is about projecting a shared vision into the future, inspiring commitment from others to align resources to match opportunities, defending the recommendations of your designers, and understanding factors that can make or break your design team's inspiration. Keeping your design talent inspired is neither an easy task nor a static effort; it is instead a fundamental skill that everyone should learn if they intend to attract and retain their creative professionals.

Designers in the hands of a passionate leader will be inspired by that leader's energy. Designers in the hands of a passionate leader will be provoked into sharing the organization's vision. Designers in the hands of a passionate leader will stick together as a team and will come to the aid of fellow teammates. Keeping your design talent inspired is as much about an effective process that leverages their abilities as it is about your own ability to motivate leadership into trusting the aligned vision that supports the business strategy. There are a number of different ways to keep your design talent inspired and motivated.

1 Momentum swing

If you are a sports fan, then you'll know what I'm talking about. Your favorite team is behind—a tackle that should have happened, a foul ball, a missed shot at the net, a red card on the best player. Things are not looking very good for the big win, but then something happens.

Working with design and creative professionals is a matter of leveraging their passions in a way that not only supports the business but also enables them to fully express their vision, energy, and who they are as designers.

The team starts playing better and continues to improve after a few more goals, home runs, or touchdowns. All of a sudden there is hope of winning. What changed? That first big play empowered a mental state of believing victory is possible. Truly, it's a matter of momentum. The momentum simply shifted in their direction.

For someone managing designers, momentum doesn't come in the blink of an eye. Maybe things have not been going in the right direction for some time, you do not have a clear play on the board and your players are leaving the team. Getting the momentum going with your designers is a matter of enabling them to work on projects that are going somewhere—preferably to the marketplace. There's an unspoken understanding in the industrial design community that if a project or idea is not in the market and it's less than just a futuristic concept showing off some wicked sketching/rendering techniques, then it cannot appear in a portfolio. And getting projects into designers' portfolios is a way of giving them momentum. It's how they "get their head in the game," and it is their *raison d'être*—their goal, home run, touchdown. Yes, designers also want to work on projects that make an impact in our society—but that only happens if they are provided with the right opportunities. As one who is leading a team of designers, it's your role to make sure you give them realistic deliverables that are matched by other leadership endorsements—*before* they start the work.

2 Opportunity doesn't always knock

Managing design talent goes beyond asking your design department to produce images or concepts for the next round of research. It is not about bringing someone who can sketch to the next brainstorming session. At the same time, your job is not to simply outsource all the design to consultants—having them do all the fun and creative work and thus eventually undermining your internal staff's own capabilities. You will need to find a balance between *make* and *buy*. Part

of creating opportunities is the task of giving your designers time to work on the strategic initiatives of the business, as well as enabling them to experience their customers' pain points firsthand. Having exposure to whatever your company is looking to solve or produce is, in itself, a way to create an opportunity for inspiration.

If you are managing a team of designers and you do not have a formal background in design yourself, be prepared for your designers to need access to information or conferences that might not seem relevant to you at first. Do not shut them down; instead, ask for some accountability. Invest in their exposure to experiences outside the office! Design is a lifestyle, an attitude toward life—it's not a clock-in and clock-out type of job. There is nothing wrong with requiring a follow-up report or a presentation on what they learned. It does take time to build this type of trust within your design department. Just make sure you build increasing levels of opportunities and exposure to information over time. That's how you keep your designers on the playing field.

3 Time is a mirror

What you ask of someone is a reflection of how you value his or her time. Take a minute to consider what you are really asking your educated and trained designers to do and not to do. Are you encouraging your career-minded designers to expand their influence in the organization, or are you just keeping them at the execution level? What you should know as someone who might be managing a group of creative or design professionals is that we tend to blend our professional time and our personal time. It's almost impossible for them to stop being who they are—visually expressive people. They take inspiration from their life experiences and from the opportunities uncovered by their life paths. Working with design and creative professionals is a matter of leveraging their passions in a way that not only supports the business but also enables them to fully express their vision, energy, and who they are as designers.

Creative and design professionals do not unplug. (For that matter, if you're passionate about what you do, you probably do not unplug.) Most creative professionals take inspiration from what they see and experience off-site, as well as in the workplace. They are what they do. If their hobby is abstract painting, commission a mural for your office. If they like to cook and or even have a culinary arts degree, have them recommend the best places for dinner when clients come into town. If they love to speak, communicate, and write, have them partner with your communications department to elevate the company's brand within the design community. And if they love home brewing, let them host a happy hour at the office! The most important aspect of leveraging time to keep your design talent inspired is through various opportunities that you, as the manager, need to make happen. This could be as simple as getting a foosball table into the studio or inviting your designers to an off-site team-building event for a few days.

4 Investment is a just a number

"We need a cost-out! Quick—head to the design department!" This phrase will make your designers' heads drop. Their shoulders will hang low. They might not say it, but they will be disappointed that the vision, hard work, late nights, and passion they have devoted to the product are being seen as an added cost rather than an added value. Of course, there will be some cost-outs that are not connected with the experience of the customer/consumer—but please, first consider how the design came to be, and then work with your design staff to find that number. Together.

Because different business functions have different key performance indicators (KPIs), it can be messy and difficult to align them all into one seamless effort. But one KPI should never be sacrificed for another, especially when it comes to design. Who knows? Your design department just might come up with an invention that not only

solves the current issue but also prevents others from marketing a similar solution.

As business stakeholders, we need to understand and consider profit margins, capital investment, and the overall brand promise. Your senior design staff knows this very well. But investments in design are not always a matter of simply adding more designers or contracting out the work. Educating your organization about the design process and about design research methods—or even just working toward a design-thinking attitude—are also investments. If your organization can start thinking like designers—crafting elegant and intuitive solutions that delight the consumer through the experience—then the actual design work, the skilled aspect, will be easier to execute.

5 The vernacular of roles

Design thinking is currently one of the most popular phrases within the design community—perhaps even within the business community. A few years ago it was *human-centered design*, or perhaps *user-centered design*. Waiting in the wings are *experience design* and *service design*, as business cards begin to read Experience Designer, Storytelling Innovator, and even Vice President of Integrated Experience Design and Development. Indeed, "telling the story" and considering experience from the viewpoint of the consumer is becoming more and more important (along with building an effective internal in-house team that can execute the planned vision). I believe the fundamental desire to add value beyond traditional "designed" elements, as well as aspiring to influence the inputs that predicate the workflow of design, is the reason driving this focus, whether the focus is products, services, software, or retail experience design.

Within the design community, the industrial designer is the overall design champion of the products' physical world. These professionals will balance the bill of materials with the proper business constraints and, at the same time, help

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bring in the niche functions of design that are needed for the task at hand. When you work with designers, you need to understand their required inputs and outputs. They are what differentiate design functions. And, yes, the tools of the trade also differ by discipline. You would not ask a user interface designer to design a store layout using Autodesk, nor should you ask an industrial designer to make posters in Adobe Illustrator.

6 Alignment: A little to the left

Starting. Stopping. Placing things on hold. Pushing back launch dates, or simply inflicting too much overtime on your designers because of poor planning—this kills the joy of doing good work. Sure, your design or creative department can adapt, but at what cost? They can operate within tight deadlines, and they try to do their best within the constraints they are given. Pulling late nights and overnight hours to work and finalize a presentation, or praying that the computer does not crash during an overnight render—these have become sad aspects of the current culture of design. Designers are used to an iterative and critique-driven process, but one thing they cannot control or may not have the political aptitude to manage is misalignment among the higher-level business functions.

As an organizational leader, you know that proper alignment is critical. No one wants to waste the organization's time, or worse, fail to produce what should have been a marketable product. These are times at which the design of the organization itself must be questioned. Does your design department have representation at the executive level? Perhaps you are leaning on external design contractors, studios, or creative agencies, and design is not a strategic initiative for your business model. If your organization does not have the means to develop a full-stack design department—that is, senior vice president to staff-level designers with everything in between—perhaps alignment is not the issue. Perhaps your goal should be one of finding a small

team of talented designers that will fit within your organization's culture.

7 Talented behaviors

There are many ways to attract talented designers. Open up a design studio in the heart of a major metropolitan city or one with access to the ocean, or simply find a location that offers a reasonable cost of living along with a healthy lifestyle. That will go far, but you must also be sure to search out talented design managers. These are people who know how to set goals, maintain transparency, and facilitate collaboration and engagement. They will also offer an aesthetic philosophy that melds with your organization's values, an ability to champion the direction their designers take, and of course a good technical understanding of the manufacturing environment. These are the kinds of people who hire good designers, and the kind that good designers want to work for.

Another way to attract design talent and build a design team's inspiration is through the rewarding of good design. Design awards, you ask? Doesn't paying to enter an award contest when you might not even know if you will be nominated sound like a waste of time? Isn't it basically frivolous and narcissistic? No. Design awards are actually a way to give an experience and a lasting positive affirmation to your designers that their work is valuable, and that the company values it.

Awards can be given internally, as well as externally. External awards are a way of marketing your designers within the larger design community, and as such they are a way of giving them something that no paycheck will ever be able to give them. However, design awards recognize the efforts your design staff have made toward the product, given the difficulties of the business constraints they face. They offer peer recognition and acknowledgement of challenges faced in the course of keeping a design's integrity intact while bringing it to the marketplace. They are also a way for your public relations and human resources department to attract the interest of the design community.



Lee Fain is passionate about design's ability to enhance front-end innovation activities within large multinational corporations and the importance of bringing to life product concepts using the tools of communication within a new product development process. He

has more than 10 years experience working inside the design studios of GE Appliances, 3M Design Lab, and Electrolux Group Design. Fain received a Master of Fine Arts in industrial design from the Savannah College of Art and Design, and a Bachelor of Arts in

communications from Campbell University in North Carolina. He is currently a Sr. Design Strategist with Idea Couture living in Huntersville, North Carolina.

When you do decide to hire design managers and designers, do not forget to ask your human resources department for their portfolios; within the design community, these are sometimes more important than resumes. Of course, the work you are expecting from a designer will determine the kinds of work you're looking for in a portfolio. An entry-level designer should at the very least be capable of articulating his or her thinking process with a reasonable level of fidelity or quality of concept generation. Mastery of software and other technical skills, such as sketching, can always be improved upon over time, but a designer should be able to demonstrate a strong aptitude in the required skill sets if he or she is to hit the ground running. If you are seeking more senior-level talent, look for compelling challenges the designer has met in an elegant way through a variety of approaches. Even higher, at the leadership level, you're looking for someone who can articulate a dialogue with a variety of other departments and disciplines, someone who has demonstrated ability to motivate creative professionals and, of course, an executive who knows how to approach corporate politics—something that can only be mastered through emotional intelligence.

8 Echo across the corporation

Speaking of emotional intelligence, it is the unobserved and unnoticed collaboration or conversation that tends to be the most politically effective. Inspiring design talent is not always done in plain sight; the ideas, strategies, and overall philosophy of the supporting framework are critical. Are you socializing the innovations and ideas of your designers? Are you working to manage the way information flows to them so that they can create their own understanding of how everything fits together? And are you bringing them back at the right time—not to kill their dreams, but to help them see their own designs in a new way?

The hidden and social aspects of organizational work are compelling from a wide range of

viewpoints. It's amazing to witness the morphing of attitudes and alliances when executive leadership shifts within an organization. You can always tell who is on your side—they're the ones who understand and embrace your language, thoughts, and approaches even when you're not around. Developing an affinity with your design staff, even if you're not directly managing them, will go far to set the tone. (Heck—put on a nice G-Star type of jacket when presenting to them. It will communicate that you appreciate good design.) Supporting the "design voice" doesn't have to be aimed directly at the designers, and it cannot, above all else, be about your own agenda of getting to the next position while leaving them behind. It might have been your vision, but it was their late nights and hard work that made it a reality. No one gets credit for *wanting* to make something innovative happen. It's the team that provides the result that deserves the credit.

If you're in an organization that manages the design staff directly, it can be difficult to nail down the best ways to inspire a studio or even individual designers. Inspiration cannot be just about the paycheck or about placating your designers about the business attributes they can't control. It has to be about making a difference—leveraging their desire to create meaningful experiences—as well as empowering their mastery of skills and the pride they can take in their augmented portfolios.

Above all, to keep your design talent inspired, bring a passionate attitude into the office. Realize that designers and creative professionals have chosen to go through a rather narrow gate in pursuit of a career. Understanding your designers' desires at a deeper level, in the same way you want to know your customer at a deeper level, will give you a significant return on the experience of having a design staff. Turn your design thinking process inward and learn how to design the experience of your designers; that's how you'll come to appreciate how to keep designers in the hands of a passionate leader. ■