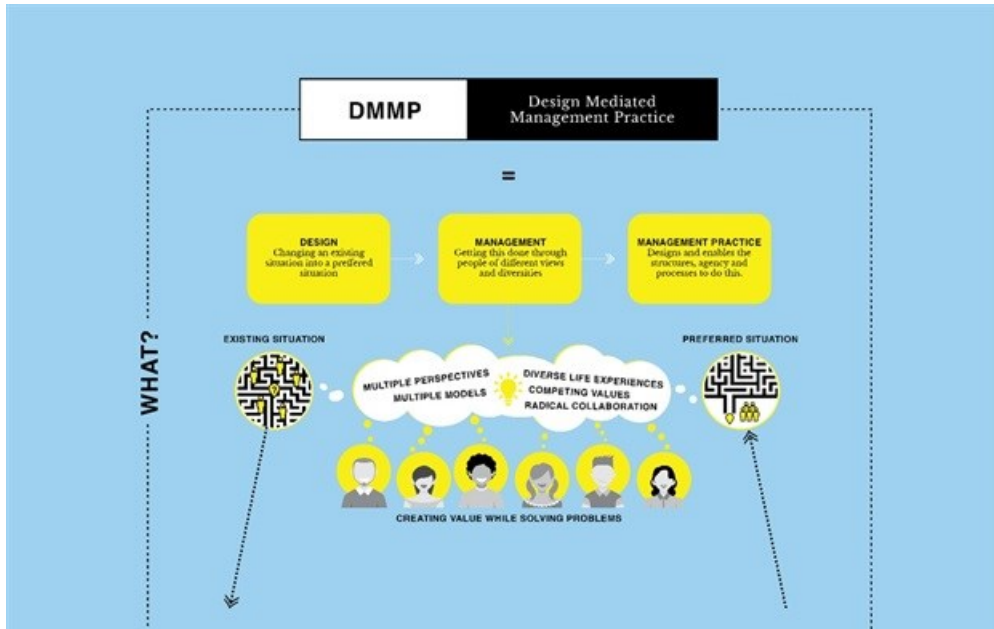# Design-led or design-mediated?

By Robert Bloom   22 Nov 2016

Design is a powerful management 'thinking and doing' discipline that, according to Eric Herbert, helps people move from a current situation to a preferred situation. This was his definition of design and it still applies today.

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Design is, as a management skill, becoming the most relevant collaborative capability to use to navigate organisational challenges across almost every discipline. Companies like IBM, Coca-Cola and many companies in various fields including banking, healthcare and fast-moving consumer goods are adopting this framework to become more human-centric in a digital and technology-led world.

The question some of us are asking is whether to use the terms "design-driven" or "design-led". My mentor a few months ago, who introduced me to design thinking, in 2010 stopped me, abruptly, in my tracks regarding this. He asked:

"How can we say that we are design-led when the very principles we expound are around collaboration, empathy and diversity?"

Mental-model-disruption-caught-in-the-headlight-moment

Half-way up the rock face of the mountain I was climbing I suddenly realised I may have taken the wrong route. Now what? Find another route, climb back down or jump onto the adjacent face? Say Cheese.

So, I reflected. If we (as design thinkers) talk of the importance of "multi-disciplinary" and "needs" and "feelings" and "emotions" even "diversity", how can we so arrogantly say we are design-led? Surely if we require and seek diverse, trans-disciplinary people and knowledge to do "good design", we can't claim that we are design-led. Perhaps, I thought, we could argue that we as designers are "led" by design and empathy. But that would be a redundant thing to say. So, unable to turn back, I continued my route, enlightened by this wonderful empathic insight.

And all the while I was asking myself, 'is design and being a design thinker the only way to find the truth and the light? To outwit the competition and stay there? Should we be challenging organisations to drive this as their competitive advantage

above all costs?'

And if we claim to be looking for diversity of thought and experiences, then how can we arrogantly say we are "driven" by anything, as we need the diversity of other disciplines to guide and (dare I say) lead us when and where necessary and relevant.

So, if that was the case, would it not be more empathic to say to colleagues (and the world) that we co-create with everyone (especially our customers and stakeholders), that we embrace diversity and that we design and hence co-create with the universal and sustainable needs (of the planet) in mind?

I would argue, therefore, that it is this notion of diversity and universality that we are striving for in our business activities and that design is the conduit, the enabler and one of the guides behind innovation that results in sustainable growth for all. Hence, when designing, we are not led by any one discipline but are guided by many.

What is design-mediation?

Herbert Simon defined design as the following: *"Design… The purposeful move from a current situation to a preferred situation."*
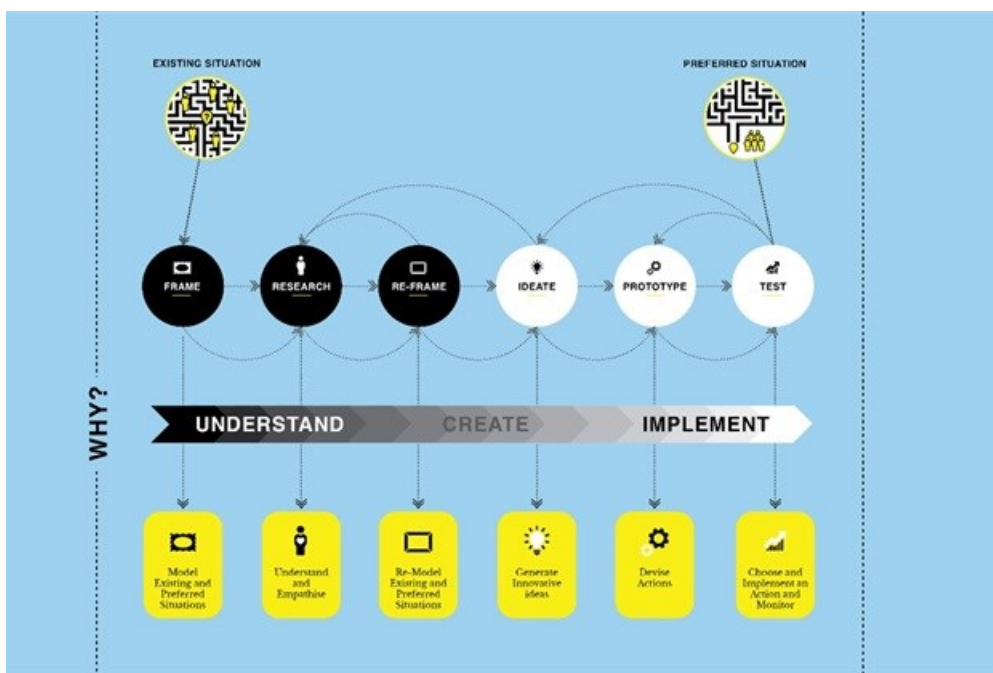
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So, as designers (and we are all designers), what we are doing is trying to mediate a way towards good design or a preferred situation using a trans-disciplinary approach. In that, we are inviting collaboration and by learning to appreciate each other's point of view, we have empathy.

In conclusion, my colleague and mentor has shown me the light that a design-mediated approach would be a more human-centric and collaborative way of guiding organisations and the people associated with them to create value for all.
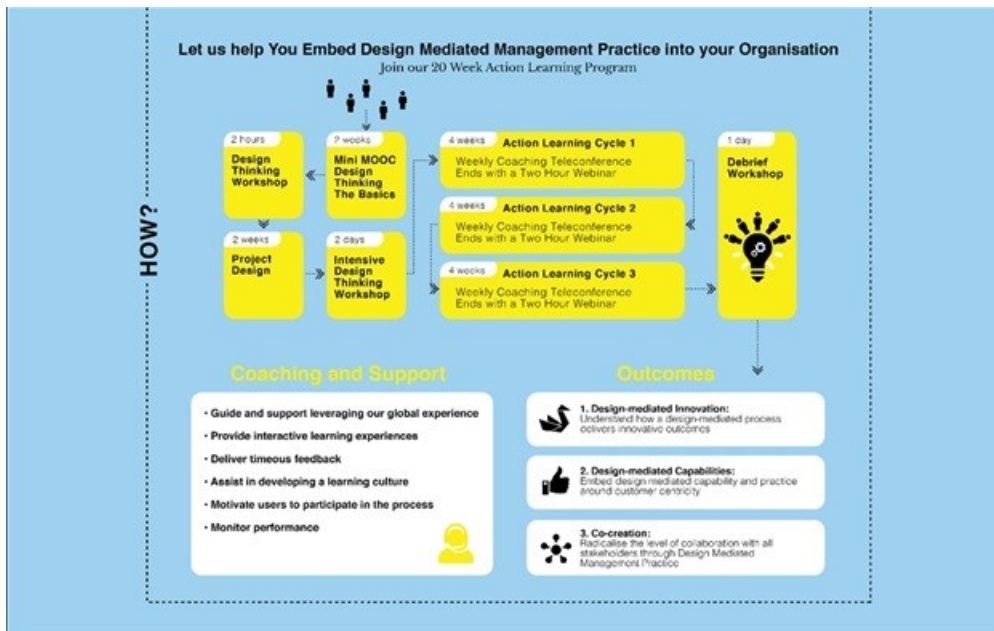
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To continue the discussion, contact us at Robert@designthinkersgroup.com.

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