

Chapter 22: Successful design teams

In the design profession, nearly all important projects are too large to be completed by just one person. Because of this, each creative firm strives to develop a culture that fosters effective teamwork.

In many other professions, teams can be rather hierarchical, inflexible, and slow. This is especially true for corporate teams that are together for a number of years. Over time, they often become inward-focused and bureaucratic. They suffer from turf battles and politics. Design teams, however, are quite different. They are brought together for a short period of time, usually just a few weeks or a few months, to complete a single project. No two projects are identical, so the size and composition of each team varies. A cookie-cutter approach will not work — most projects need different processes and tools. To accommodate this, design firms structure their resources like a network, making them scalable and flexible enough to allow multiple configurations.

Design teams have fewer rules and a greater flow of information, both of which are important for rapid innovation. Design teams are externally oriented and focused on client needs. Because of this, the organizational structure for the team tends to be decentralized and organic rather than hierarchical and rigid. Having fewer layers and rules allows the group to be more adaptive to the external environment. Design teams also have an egalitarian nature that encourages self-management and regular participation by all group members in decision making. Individuals who do well in this environment are those who are drawn to challenges and are strongly motivated by opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Getting the right mix of skills

When a new project is first being pitched, one of the most important aspects of advance planning is to determine the exact mix of skills that will be required for success. Smart planning includes lining up the appropriate resources and resolving any competing demands for their availability. Design of course is the magic ingredient in the mix, but other skills will be vitally important as well. The needs of a large project will span multiple disciplines. A complex problem will require a wide range of expertise — from research, strategy, and content development to technology, engineering, and project management. The ultimate success of the project will depend upon getting just the right mix of talent, technical skills, and industry experience.

The exact size of each team is determined by the number of separate skill sets required. On a large project, there will be a core team that is augmented by other players on an as-needed basis. Many organizational experts advise that the most effective size for a problem-solving group is between five and seven people. Because of this, core teams tend to be small. Other resources are called upon in a very targeted way. In design firms, the core team for a project will be composed primarily of employees. The firm makes an important business decision about which skills to have on staff. This defines its core competencies and enables it to meet the recurring needs within its category of services. Outside resources are used for temporary needs and to accommodate project variations. Keep in mind that key project skills can also be provided by the client organization. Good design firms work in close collaboration with clients, functioning more like a partner than a vendor.

When other professionals are brought into a project, they may be freelancers or separate creative firms brought in on a subcontract basis. Within each of the many possible skill sets, there will also be people at different levels of experience, from senior down to entry-level. Not everyone will be involved for the full duration of the project — some may be needed during one or two phases only. The full team must of course be large enough to accomplish the work — the project will be doomed if the overall team is too small to carry the load or if key skills are missing. However, as teams increase in size, they can suffer from less cohesion, more confusion, and escalating costs.

Clarifying each person's role

Each person is added to the team for the skills that they possess and then placed in a particular role. It's important to clarify at the start exactly which role each person is being asked to play and what their relationship will be to the others. An individual's role may vary significantly from project to project. Each role carries certain responsibilities and is assigned specific tasks — the daily activities required to move the project forward.

As you can see, quite an assortment of individuals can be involved on a big project. Once you have assembled the right mix of resources, how do you keep everything functioning

smoothly? Two roles are vital to hold this shifting cast together — a team leader and a project manager (see Figure 22.01).

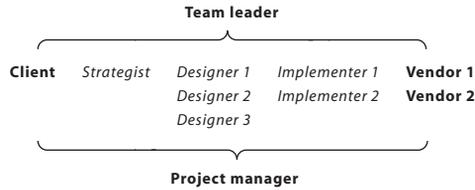
Team leader

In design firms, a creative director usually fills the role of the leader, although a senior professional from another discipline might also serve in this capacity. In general, leaders of design teams do not take a top-down approach, acting like a boss and telling people precisely what to do. Rather, he or she serves more as a facilitator and a catalyst. The leader must motivate the team members, clarify difficult issues, and orchestrate everyone's efforts. This means exploring alternatives, pushing boundaries, keeping the whole team involved, and moving the group toward consensus. It means getting members to share and preventing the team from diverging into the silos of separate disciplines. It means pulling the entire team together at key milestones, conducting brainstorming sessions and critiques, and guiding the development of a unifying concept for the project that will unite the various disciplines and span different types of media.

The leader will have to make tough judgment calls when the group is faced with difficult trade-offs. The leader must guide the creative process in such a way that the finished work is strategically sound and of the highest possible quality. In a short period of time, good ideas must be developed and then executed flawlessly. The team leader serves as the primary client contact for strategic and creative issues. He or she is responsible for managing client expectations over the course of the project and may often have to push back and persuade.

The team leader must also be sensitive to the needs and goals of individual team members. A good team leader will serve as a mentor, encouraging others to stretch creatively and helping them to develop their potential. In the case of staff members, this includes nurturing their personal growth over the course of multiple projects. To be a mentor, the team leader must have credibility. He or she must bring to the position proven ability and relevant industry experience. Leaders must establish and maintain mutual respect.

Figure 22.01. Design teams draw upon diverse resources. They function best with guidance from an effective leader and support from an experienced project manager.



This requires honesty, trust, and a genuine and consistent emphasis on us/we/our. Effective design team leaders tend to have a decentralized approach to authority, allowing individuals to work independently on tasks, and then bring their work back to the group for evaluation and integration. This moves most projects forward through a cycle of rapid prototyping and incremental changes.

Lastly, the team leader must see to it that excitement and fun do not drain away from the work. Fun is a powerful motivator. It puts things into new contexts and leads to fresh ideas. Every design firm faces a paradox here. What is the right balance between freedom and discipline? True innovation requires creative risk. It involves experimentation and making mistakes. At the same time, however, design teams must be provided with just the right amount of structure. They must take a mature and responsible approach to budgets and schedules. In this latter respect, the team leader can be greatly assisted by a capable project manager.

Project manager

The role of the project manager is a very important one. Most design teams find it indispensable to have someone specifically charged with the coordination of logistics. This person must have a good understanding of the creative and production processes involved, but their role on the team is not that of a designer. When a project is first being pitched, the project manager may assist in developing estimates and timelines and identifying potential risks. Once a project is active, his or her primary responsibility is to support the team by taking care of a range of administrative tasks. Project management requires a special skill set that is not the same as design ability. In small firms, designers may be asked to take care of the logistics on their own projects, but these responsibilities may not

match their strongest skills or be the best use of their time. Having a project manager on the team frees up designers to spend more time actually designing. The project manager arranges any necessary meetings, distributes updated information, monitors budgets and deadlines, and documents the progress of each assignment.

The job title for this person may vary. On an interaction design team they may be called a “producer.” On teams that do mostly print work, this person may be a “production manager” with special expertise related to print buying. On an advertising team, he or she may be the “traffic manager,” making sure that the right materials are in the right place at the right time. Often the project manager serves as a filter to protect the productivity of other team members by shielding them from distractions. He or she may take incoming logistical information and requests and then route them to the appropriate team members. However, this is not at all the same as the account director role that exists in many advertising agencies. Design firms tend to regard account directors as middlemen or interpreters. Most design consultancies eliminate the account director role in order to have direct contact between the client and the creative team.

Dealing with people problems

The ideal situation for every team is to maintain positive interpersonal dynamics throughout the project. Realistically, though, a few personality clashes are almost inevitable when you have a variety of bright, ambitious people who are working together for the first time, particularly as deadlines approach and pressure mounts (see Figure 22.02). So what can you do to prevent or minimize people problems? Here are the secrets of successful teamwork:

Careful recruitment

Be selective when first assembling the team. In addition to creative and technical skills, look for personalities that will fit together well in a team environment. Look for professionalism, reliability, and a positive attitude. A collection of big egos will clash and work at cross-purposes. Individuals who are difficult or manipulative will undermine the success of the entire project.

Mutual respect

Various team members will come from different professional backgrounds. Each should be an expert in his or her respective field, and that expertise must be acknowledged and respected by the others. An “all-star” team is a collaboration of peers where all skills are equally necessary for success. In fact, the cross-pollination of different perspectives is one of the most powerful advantages of teams.

A larger commitment to the project

Everyone in the group will win or lose together. It’s not possible for just one element of a project to succeed in isolation. The goals of the individuals involved must be in sync with the group’s goals. Different intended outcomes will lead to failure.

A shared understanding of how the process will work

Design teams need a common framework and shared language for working together. Effective collaboration requires a commitment to shared methodology, terminology, and milestones. The process will include open critiques with all members participating — the goal is to identify and develop the very best ideas from all sources.

Open communication

Along the way, it’s vital to maintain positive and effective communication and a commitment to rapid and fair conflict resolution. Projects benefit from creative tension but not personal conflicts. When differences arise, they must be acknowledged and addressed. This takes evenhanded intervention by the team leader, active facilitation by the project manager, and a strong group commitment to resolving problems. The team leader must keep critiques from becoming personal. All members should receive frequent feedback on task performance from the leader and other team members, and constructive suggestions whenever change is needed.

Monitoring progress daily and weekly

Most design projects involve a lot of information sharing and meetings. On big projects, it’s typical to have a quick daily huddle to address pending deadlines or emergencies.

There will also be a more comprehensive weekly meeting that is organized by the project manager and guided by the team leader.

Even though digital technologies make it possible to collaborate remotely, on a fast-moving project there is no substitute for being in the same room and negotiating activities face-to-face. To respect everyone's schedule, keep it short and simple. In the meeting, state what has changed and what has been achieved. Be sure to recognize positive behaviors, results, and contributions. You should also include bad news, if there is any. This is a chance for the group to correct any miscommunications, clear the air if necessary, and refocus its energies. (However, the team leader will have to make a judgment call if a serious personal problem has come up with an individual team member. It may be best to remember the old adage about praising publicly and criticizing privately.) Input should be solicited from every team member, and each should have an opportunity to contribute. At the end of the meeting, summarize the decisions that have been made and the follow-up actions that are needed. For each action item, identify the person responsible and the date when it must be completed. There must be personal accountability for results.

Whenever possible, keep progress visible. Display the latest iterations of the creative work and any other important documentation such as research findings and brand strategy documents. Post charts that show the burn rate on budgets and updated schedules that remind everyone of important milestones and deadlines (for more information about burn rates, see Chapter 25). There should be one central repository for project information. It could be an intranet site, but it's more beneficial if the team has a shared physical space. Many industrial design firms set up a workroom where all of the materials related to a large project can be left spread out. All team meetings take place there. If the materials are confidential and must be protected when the team is away, the workroom will have a door that can be locked. Having a shared space enables the team to work in close physical proximity, which increases interaction and encourages camaraderie.

A job well done

At the end of a project, the team delivers the completed work to the client or hands it off to a third party such as a printing company for implementation. As soon as that happens, all team resources are reassigned. This raises a very important psychological issue. To stay in business, each design firm must line up a constant stream of assignments. The master schedule is kept very tight so that, as soon as one ends, everyone is immediately shifted to the next. However, it can be frustrating if there is never a moment's pause to savor what the team has accomplished together. This can damage staff morale and contribute to burnout. At the very least, the full team should have one final meeting to conduct a postpartum review of the completed project. This is an opportunity to evaluate the finished work in light of its success criteria. It's a chance to discuss what went well and what didn't and to learn from any failures. In a large firm, there should also be a way of sharing what you learn with the rest of the organization so that you are creating a culture of learning for the overall company (for more information about wrapping up large projects, see Chapter 25). For staff members, there should also be a way to include feedback on team play in their performance evaluations. This encourages personal and professional growth.

At the conclusion of a large or difficult project, it's also important to satisfy the very human needs for emotional closure and a sense of completion. There are many ways to recognize and reward the team: a small event or celebration, a team photograph, a personal memento, or perhaps a personal note of thanks from the team leader. All of these are effective ways of closing the loop and can have a big impact on morale. They mark the conclusion of a shared experience, send a clear message that the effort was worthwhile, and create positive motivation for future efforts.

INDIVIDUALLY

An individual team member can become distracted by a personal issue. It may be as a result of something that's happening in his or her private life, quite outside of work. This may lead to lower productivity, self-frustration, even quitting the team without completing assigned tasks.

BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE

There may be two team members who don't get along, which makes it awkward for them to collaborate effectively.

WITHIN A GROUP

Internal bickering or feuding can divide the team into rival factions. Divided allegiances damage team cohesion and can make it impossible to achieve and maintain consensus.

BETWEEN SEPARATE GROUPS

In a larger firm, tensions and rivalries may arise between separate teams or business units. The hostilities may be fueled by corporate politics, budget battles, or competition for resources.

Figure 22.02. Problems with people can crop up in several different ways.