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Assembling and Leading Mission Driven Teams
A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract. *Globalization, interconnectivity, and instant access to information have multiplied the complexity of the problems industries are facing. A new way of looking, feeling and thinking is necessary that will lead to richer strategies and new tools to create organizations that have a positive impact on their environment and culture. High performance teams driving innovation are built on goal-focused individuals, from cross-functional backgrounds. They are assembled to collaborate on solving particular challenges of achieving an objective. The current study aims to analyze the creative process within ad hoc mission driven teams and propose a design framework for organizational practices. Strategic design transforms complex problems into sustainable solutions, by focusing on systemic innovation. Unlike design thinking, which is a formal method used mainly in the consultant model, strategic design is a design practice applied on organizations culture, policy, governance, and strategy. Questions such as how to run mission-driven teams to function on their own and how to reduce micromanagement and oversight and focus on the production, testing and iteration of innovative solutions, will be addressed. The study is based on qualitative research, with the focus on exploring case-studies and conducting interviews. The paper helps organizational leaders and team managers to design solutions for cultural practices that are aligned with sustainable industry goals and business performance.*

Keywords: mission-driven innovation, strategic design, ad hoc teams, sustainable leadership, organizational practice, talent management.

Introduction

Spotting a business opportunity is mainly a creative process (Barringer, Ireland, 2019) usually involving a design practice such as the design thinking methodology. However, design cannot follow a prescribed course towards a solution, it is seen more and more as an exploratory process than "prescribed trajectories" (Hill, 2012). In the current paradigm, where we experience economic and humanitarian crises, environmental issues, and rapid advancement of technologies, we need to address specific business needs and move fast with generating solutions in uncertainty. This disruptive context can be approached through strategic design.

„Wicked problems", such as the ones mentioned above, and named after Horst Rittle and Melvin Webber (1973), need to be approached in new ways by skilled individuals coming together to co-create with stakeholders and owners of the problem, the most suitable solutions.

Within the current study, I will start by introducing the topic with a literature review, focusing on defining mission-driven innovation and tracing the use of strategic design in organizations, with impact on corporate culture. Although team building is a process that differs from organization to organization, assembling mission-driven teams to solve specific business needs is a scalable practice. How these teams are recruited, coordinated and managed is a question I will address in my research, through a case-study, presented after the comprehensive literature review.

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I will analyse the company Mesa, that has worked with over 300 organizations and over 1400 professionals, following a methodology inspired by design practices. The agency's business model is a concrete application of the process of cross-functional team building, delivering innovative solutions in a short period of time, with less friction. By working together with the owner of the problem, company's stakeholders and international multi-skilled professionals, the goal oriented workshops facilitate collaboration and co-creation.

The conclusions reflect the importance of having an organizational practice to assemble and lead cross-functional teams, either in house or remote, and what are the benefits of adopting rituals in corporations. It also underlines the negative effects of corporate governance on the performance of in-house ad hoc teams and the role of strategic design in addressing change and building a foundation for cultural innovation.

Literature review

Innovation is no longer anchored in the R&D department of organisations or in large-scale public practices. Lars Fuglsang (2008) focuses on his research on the sense making process behind innovation which he defines as an interactive process that engages ideas and opinions from individuals with different backgrounds. Other than a creative process, innovation is also an artefact which raises the question of durability in an innovative project. Connie Svabo et al. (2014), linked design with innovation and suggests that care and accompanying ethical issues can have a direct impact on the outcome of the process.

Innovation is considered a mandatory stage in any business process, defined by the need of industries to respond to major societal, environmental, and economic challenges (Mazzucato et al., 2019). Mission-driven innovation is addressing societal challenges, depicted as wicked problems: societal problems characterized by conflict, complexity, and uncertainty in policymaking where vision-driven innovation has been emphasized as a possible approach (Wanzenböck et al., 2020).

Missions are a strategic mechanism which sets the right ambitions (designing missions) for teams to engage with when designing a product, service or a strategy for sustainable business practices. Mission-driven innovations require new governance models, multiple pillars of knowledge and hands on experience.

The framework for mission-oriented innovation (fig.1), illustrates the movement from broad sustainable goals challenges to specific missions (Mazzucato, 2019) in organizational strategies. Mazzucato proposes a criteria for selecting missions in organisations, based on: the level on which they address societal value (1), produce measurable outcomes (2), utilize technology and innovation (3), need cross-disciplinary approach (4) and inspire multiple competing solutions (5).

Her research is based on 4 main questions: how to use public policy to inspire a direction of change and involve culture to enable bottom up experimentation (1), how to construct organisations that learn-by-doing and welcome trial and error (2), how to evaluate public investments which have the potential to shape new markets (3), how to help the public and private sector to engage in new deals, socializing risks and rewards (4).

Welcoming uncertaintly by constantly co-creating and sharing in mission driven projects helps companies build capacity and engage talent by picking the willing and skilled individuals who are seeing value in the mission they engage with.

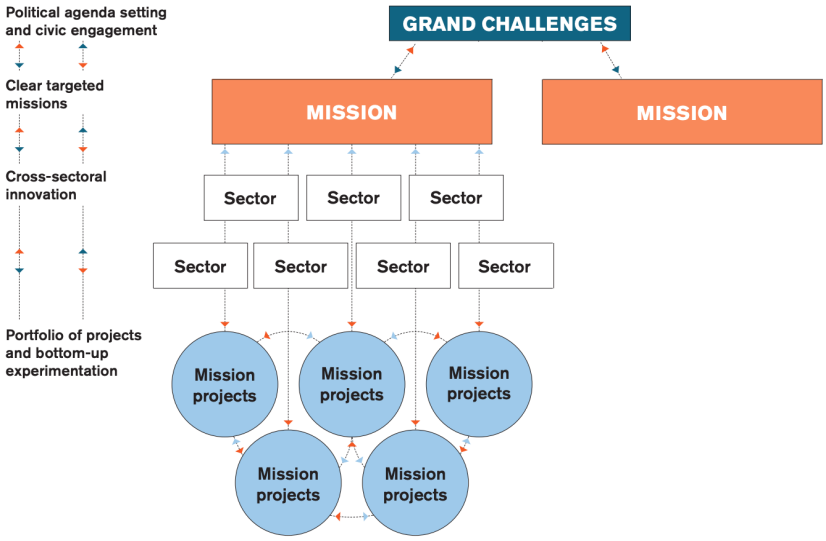


Figure 1. Framework for mission-oriented innovation

Source: www.ucl.ak.uk

Human centred design has been used in the last decades to drive innovation in organisations. Companies have used the design thinking methodology: empathise, define, ideate, prototype, test, since the early 1990, when Ideo brought the designer's approach to solving complex problems into the mainstream. Design thinking is the core creative process for any designer rooted in solving complex problems. However, in today's corporate ecosystem it is used to create new products and services, and therefore considered a traditional approach, rather than a systemic one.

Design's value in this context is couched in relation to problem solving. Over the last decade design as a practice has been adopted by organizations focused on optimizing performance, becoming a strategic tool used to approach complexity. It has evolved from the production of artifacts to the creation of services and alteration of systems.

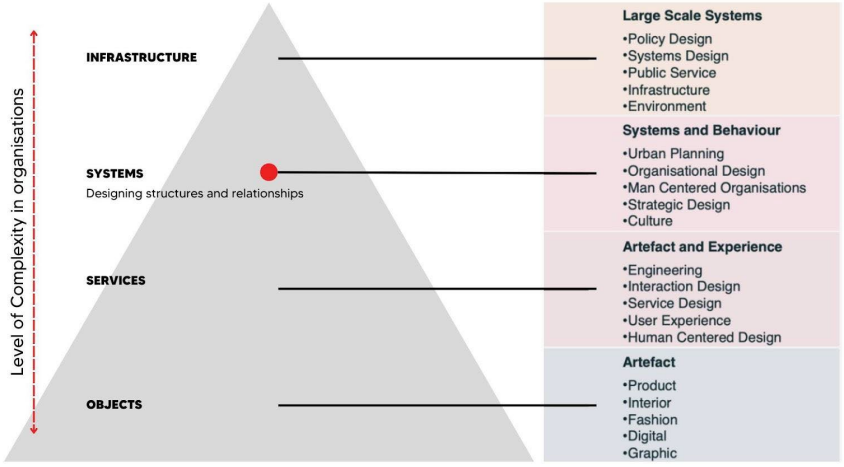


Figure 2. Author's own processing based on The Stratification of Design Thinking

Source: Di Russo (2013).

Dan Hill defines strategic design as a catalyst of cultural innovation, by solving complex problems which require creative thinking and opening to new ideas. The focus of this process is on the systemic redesign of cultures of decision-making at the individual and institutional level.

Roger Martin (2009) has underlined the role of strategic design practices in corporate culture. He has noted the importance of structuring two typologies of jobs within organisations: permanent tasks and project based outcomes, to balance administration and invention. Project structured labour is designed to move knowledge, with finite effort by teams working on advancing mysetry to heristic. The practice demands business to organise accordingly, assemble ad hoc teams to work on delimited goals.

According to Graham Jonst et al. (2020) the innovation capacity of an organisation is given by its ability to assemble, manage and lead working teams. Authors argue that cross-cultural competence in a team is a valuable asset that can have positive effects not only on the organisation but also on its stakeholders. I adopt the definition of teams proposed by Kozlowski and Bell (2003) who suggest that teams are "composed of two or more individuals who exist to perform organizationally relevant tasks. Cross functional and multi cultural teams establish themselves and are more effective when encouraged by organisational environment and leadership. In depth studies have been conducted on the effects of cultural diversity in teams, in terms of how they communicate, engage and collaborate. However, team cooperation is highly influenced by its management. Teams with structural empowerment, and less emphasis on the interactive use of control, achieve greater effectiveness (Kozlowski et al., 2003). Work delivered by larger teams have a more linear approach and are oriented towards more-recent developments. On the contrary, contributions by smaller teams are rooted into the past and viewed as disruptive, future oriented. (Baird et al., 2021). Finally, setting appropriate project goals and team leadership are mentioned the most often in latest research focused on sustainable innovation of corporate culture.

Organisational practices build the culture of a company. The implementation of well-build human resource management practices is considered critical for the success and competitive advantage of twenty-first century organisations. HR practices are, in essence, the formula of effective management of teams and individuals leading to the success of an organisation's perfomance.

Methodology

Until recently, design has been utilized for its problem-solving ability. Today, as the literature review showed, companies involve creative processes based on design practices to optimize team performance and develop alternative business trajectories. Mission-driven innovation is the primary focus of business looking to adopt sustainable practices and establish their place in the new market.

The methodology used for this paper is theoretical research, author's own experience and a case-study. A case-study, defined by Yin, is a research method that requires a factual analysis of a particular circumstance. The aim of this approach is to generate an in-depth understanding of the process of assembling mission-driven teams and how to lead it to solve specific business needs, using design. As presented in the introduction, I selected a representative creative agency, in the service industry, that used design principles to create a unique problem-solving methodology co-creating with problem stakeholders and external multi-skilled talent.

Results and discussions

1. Overview of the problem

In the disruptive paradigm that we currently experience, the lack of organisational practices designed to solve complex challenges and execute solutions faster with cross-functional teams is exposing industries to great risks. As opposed to linear thinking and driving results out of analysis of data, strategic design is an integrative systems thinking oriented towards iterative prototyping. It focuses on the importance and role of both the outcome (products, objects, services) and the overall impact of the process on the context, organisation and culture.

Businesses that embed design in their practices generate 32% more revenue and 56% more shareholders returns. However, at the level of human resources and management strategies, design is not a major factor of influence. Companies apply design thinking to solve complex business problems and are less oriented towards developing processes and practices which relate to the innovation of culture and project engagement. Strategic design is the application of traditional design principles to design structures and relationships.

2. Mesa method

Mesa is a brazilian company, known as Mesa & Cadeira (Table & Chair) assembling ad hoc teams of 12 to 16 participants and leading them following a 5 days well-thought process to solve complex problems that the organisation is facing. The groups are formed by both employees of the client company and invited experts and makers, evenly distributed. The team structure is designed in such a way that it represents the sum of all the knowledge and skills needed to solve the problem.

Mesa's vision is to create a brief and efficient working environment for a small group of participants driven to build a solution for a mission they care about.

2.1 The process

2.1.1 Framing a mission statement

Mesa works with big organisations which represent the owners of the problem. Before assembling the working teams and igniting the design process, the company reframes the problem statement as a mission challenge. This stage is essential, in order to motivate the team members to come together and creatively collaborate to advance a cause that they care about.

2.2.2 Pillars of knowledge

After they frame a mission, Mesa leaders come together to identify the pillars of knowledge that they need to solve the problem. They work with the client, not for them, and therefore they create cross functional ad hoc teams which include 30% of the employees of the client company. The external talent is recruited by Mesa from different pools, after an indepth research on the experience and skill of the individuals. Because the problem is associated with a cause, the team feels responsible for delivering the solution. Also, the process of selecting the members is simplified because people decide to join the group only if they empathise with and feel connected to the mission. 12 to 16 pillars of knowledge, from different fields from design to science and technology, are chosen to solve the problem, in a 5 day timeframe.

2.2.3 *Recruiting*

The best talent is seeked to form the teams, and they are recruited following a complex process which involves network references and reading books, articles, press releases. They sit with CEO's, not only freelancers. It can be a leader from one organisation coming to the table to solve the problem for another one. The pillars are selected in relation to how they innovated in previous projects, and interviews are led to make sure the experience is relevant for the current mission.

Recruiting is essential for a Mesa workshop, if a pillar of knowledge lacks at the table, a problem cannot be completely solved.

2.2.4 The space

The process of designing a product or service is led by a Mesa leader in a dedicated space, chosen particularly in relation to the mission. The team gathers around a table, shares insights, opens the challenge and produces the solution. Mesa leaders learn about the problem when they lead the process.

2.2.5 The structure

Day one of a Mesa starts with introducing the team members and doing research to understand the whole context of the problem they are facing. On the second day, participants open the mission and use the knowledge gathered in the first day to ideate a solution. Day 3 is dedicated to producing an outcome in the form of a prototype. It is the most important step in the process. Here, the leader steps in and helps the team decide which idea they want to move forward with. By this day, the group should already have a deep knowledge of the problem and an understanding of each set of skills and experience around the table.

On day 4 the team runs tests and improves the prototype into a more functional version. Finally, day 5 is when the solution is introduced to the client and discussed. The method uses rapid prototyping tools, especially software-as-service and modular templates.

2.2.6 *The leadership*

The role of the leader is to take the group through the process of building something tangible as a solution to the problem they are facing. Leveraging the knowledge and experience of every team member, the leader builds and manages group dynamics but does not interfere in the process.

Conclusion

Every big organisation is currently impacted by the economic, environmental and humanitarian crises experienced globally. Because of Covid19, many employees are still working remotely and the relationship with the traditional workplace is being questioned. Teams are collaborating remotely and their processes are micromanaged by leaders who do not focus on outcomes and production but are more oriented towards details and shortcomings. Every company needs to operate with two mindsets: design and management. The role of a designer mindset is to tackle complex problems with little data to be analysed, generating a profound understanding of the beneficiaries and their needs, and dealing with unknowns and information gathered in the past that does not serve anymore. The manager mindset helps implement and scale the solutions.

As per the performed literature review, strategic design occupies an important role in the development and growth of a business. Strategic design is the application of design principles to solving systemic problems. It includes design thinking, at the level of developing new products and services.

Industries face wicked problems that require adaptability and efficiency. Assembling teams to deliver solutions in this context requires a deep understanding of the problems and the pillars of knowledge needed. Usually, experienced talent is found outside companies, in organisations contracted as consultants, or individuals hired as freelancers. Facing disruption, companies look for new ways to create practices that build and nurture culture. Mixed teams of international members, designed to move knowledge with finite effort drive innovation.

Spaces and processes are important when teams come together to share, ideate, prototype and deliver. As shown in the case-study of Mesa, every mission led design practice needs its own setting and details are extremely important to motivate and inspire participants. However, due to

the exponential advancement in technology, virtual environments can be used to design a work experience in the digital world, in case of remote groups.

Framing the challenge is the most important step of every design process. In design thinking, this stage comes in after understanding the context of the problem and empathising with the user. Mesa method uses empathy as a driver for formulating the right mission statement. They engage with the owner of the problem and discuss all the aspects of it, to come up with the right mission statement. The ad hoc team is then assembled only with members who relate and are inspired by it.

The creative process of designing a product or service is a dynamic activity of expanding perspectives in search for inspiration, ideas, information and coming together to share insights and find solutions. According to over 140 CEO's interviewed, one of the greatest challenges the future will face is leading diverse teams and making sure organisations stay human"(Jacob, 2020). As seen previously in the study, the assembling and coordination of teams involving design processes is based on the same principles. From converging to find a mission statement and pillars of knowledge to diverging into the search for the right talent and converging into finding a place and time to start the process.

In conclusion, design applies not only to human cooperation and the production of artefacts but also how organisations select the team members, how they lead the groups and focus on producing the outcome, instead of micromanaging.

As resulted from the research, a design practice for mission-driven team assembling bridges environmental and climate challenges with business goals to innovate, and runs on the following steps:

1. Public policy

Core to assembling the right team for a mission driven project is to understand the context in which the organisation operates in regard to the challenges the world is facing. Some industries are impacting the natural ecosystems, while others are harming human health and well-being. Real innovation comes when understanding how to use policy to set up a direction for change and encourage bottom up experimentation.

As a design approach, this stage corresponds to the level of understanding the problem, part of the design thinking methodology. Every designer needs to understand the context in which they ideate a solution for their challenge, in order to integrate the product or service they design into society. Solving complex problems involves a deeper understanding and a non-linear mindset. Strategic design goes beyond aesthetics and into contextual systems. Raising awareness and solving global issues is a contemporary design challenge.

2. Project mission

A mission statement is changing traditional innovation policy from economic growth towards societal challenges. Reframing the problem as a mission challenge inspires team members to come together and collaborate in a meaningful and efficient way.

This stage in the process of assembling mission driven teams is relying on the capacity of leaders to address global challenges with empathy for their communities and the environment. A mission statement is the impact a company wants to create in the world. It is built around 3 attributes: inspiration, practicality and commitment.

3. Pillars of knowledge

Unlike the design thinking process, which involves rounds of ideation to come up with a suitable solution, the Mesa method works around a mission which has already defined the seed for the idea.

A maximum of 16 team members are invited to participate, from different backgrounds within the organisation. They should be carefully selected based on their experience and expertise and how they solved similar problems throughout their career. They identify as a pillar of knowledge.

4. Space set-up

Every element in the space where the workshop is hosted is chosen with intention. Allowing only essentials such as: a table, chairs, paper and dedicated technology, the team is given a focused working experience. Details influence the way people feel and how they work. Creating a simple and informal environment for ad hoc teams in organisations includes choosing the right furniture, materials, surfaces and food. Having a well thought space eliminates distractions for participants and allows them to focus only on solving their mission.

5. Process

Leadership is key to driving innovation in these working environments. Leaders who are running ad hoc teams are familiar with the design process and can manage group dynamics without influencing the outcomes. They do not have to be experts in a field, they can organise around any mission as long as they know how to take the teams through the 3 days of the making process.

6. Result

The final outcome is delivered and discussed within the organisation.

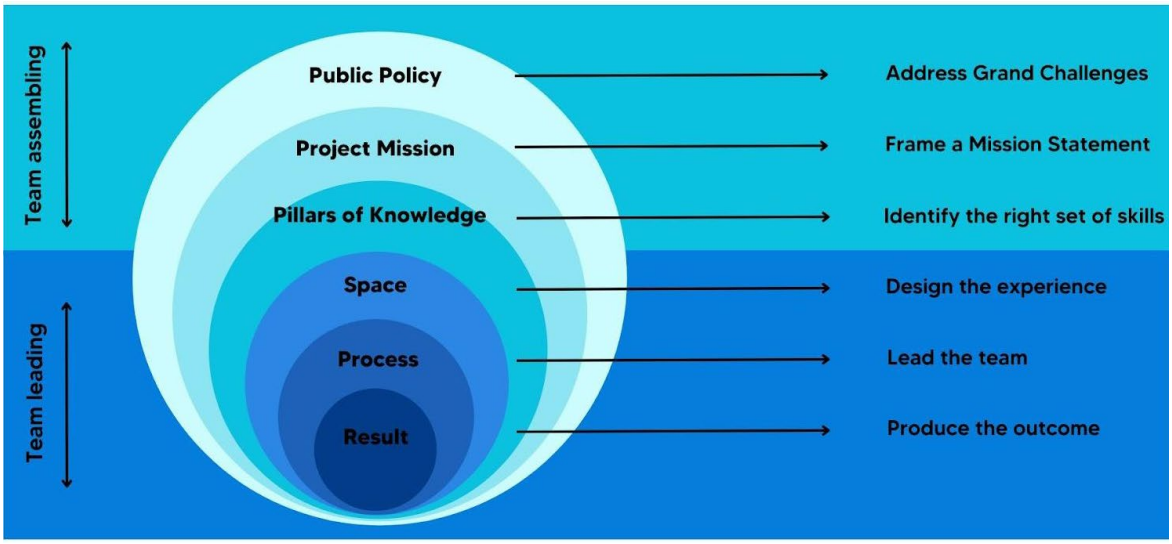


Figure 3. Framework for assembling and leading mission driven teams

Source: author's personal contribution.

Having a framework for assembling mission driven teams helps organisational leaders and team managers to design solutions for cultural practices that are aligned with sustainable industry goals and business performance. In the corporate settings, strategic design bridges organisations issues with customer needs and environmental problems, and addresses them through a culture of innovation.

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