Abstract

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The Design Leadership Framework

A framework for leading design teams
and building the design capability

INTRODUCTION

MOTIVATION

The need for design leadership is huge and companies are investing a lot to give their design teams the organizational structures, processes and tools to deliver their best work. But both experienced and newly appointed design leaders oftentimes struggle with identifying the right topics and initiatives to bring their design team and the design capability forward.

The Design Leadership Framework provides a clear overview of the relevant areas and aspects of design leadership, specifically in the context of digital product development. It supports design leaders to better understand the current state of their design team and implement the right measures. Thereby the Design Leadership Framework can be a helpful tool for strategy development and continuous improvement.

The framework is based on my experience from working in digital product development and ux design for more than a decade. Many books, articles and interviews with design leaders provided further insights - some recommendations can be found in the bibliography at the end.

I am engaged in a constant exchange with design leaders and companies to continuously improve the Design Leadership Framework and its application in organizations.

FRAMEWORK OVERVIEW

The overall task of leading a design team and building the design capability can be divided into five areas. The area of Strategy is influencing the activities and initiatives of the other four areas: Experience, Operations, Enterprise and Team.

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The framework table below shows the relevant aspects that design leadership needs to take care of for each of these main areas. It is not prescribing any specific methodology. As we know: methods, tools and trends change ever so often, but the underlying tasks and goals for design leaders stay very much the same.

THE DESIGN LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK ASPECTS

OPERATIONS	EXPERIENCE	STRATEGY	ENTERPRISE	TEAM
Define Organizational Structure	Develop Design Principles	Define Vision & Goals	Align with Business Strategy	Develop Team Culture
Define Design Workflow	Define Design Language	Develop Strategy & Roadmap	Build Stakeholder Alliances	Provide Feedback & Guidance
Manage Work Streams	Advocate User Perspective	Manage Program Initiatives	Develop Design Culture	Plan and Scale Staffing Demand
Facilitate Collaborative Design	Promote End-to-End Experience	Drive Change	Promote Design Capabilities	Manage Recruiting & Onboarding
Define Work Environment	Drive Innovation	Measure Practice & Performance	Support Enterprise Challenges	Foster Talent Growth
Ensure Design Coherence	Provide Creative Guidance		Build Design Reputation	Reflect Leadership Skills
Enable Knowledge Exchange				Manage External Partners
Assure Quality and Compliance				

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PURPOSE OF THE FRAMEWORK

The Design Leadership Framework aims at bringing together the disciplines of business and design, by offering an overview of the leadership tasks that need to be addressed by design leaders in their organizations.

Main purposes of the framework are:

- A holistic overview of design leadership responsibilities
- A structured approach to analyzing and developing the design team and the design capability in general
- A basis for strategic planning and decision-making
- A clear way for communicating about the design team, the leadership tasks and the design capability to other business functions
- An educating and inspiring deep dive into design leadership

ABOUT THIS ABSTRACT

This document is an abstract of an upcoming publication about the design leadership framework. It provides an overview for each leadership area and a short description for each aspect to enable design leaders to start working with the framework.

STRATEGY

OVERVIEW

Leadership Mission: Develop a vision and strategy for the design team and the design work. Implement and manage the necessary initiatives to execute your strategy. Measure and improve continuously.

Aspect	Short summary
Define Vision & Goals	Develop a design vision that can guide the design work, hold together the team and connect leadership activities.
Develop Strategy & Roadmap	Develop a strategy and a plan that will bring the vision alive and lead the design team towards its aspired goals.
Manage Program Initiatives	Set up a design program that is based on your strategy and consists of a set of projects to close the gap between vision and implementation.
Drive Change	Prepare and unite the team for change initiatives that are to come - especially changes in organizational structures or processes.
Measure Practice & Performance	Measure and assess the quality and impact of the design work and the current practice of the design team regularly.

QUESTIONS

- How are you currently approaching the area of Strategy?
- Which aspects are working well?
- What are current challenges in this area?
- Which aspects are overlooked or neglected?

🖊 Your Notes

EXPERIENCE

OVERVIEW

Leadership Mission: Influence and support the innovation of products, services and experiences with a human-centered angle and a design-led approach. Envision and define what great design means for the enterprise and what it looks like. Provide creative leadership and input for relevant design decisions.

Aspect	Short summary
Develop Design Principles	Define design principles that describe on a general level, what are the guiding values and guidelines for design in your team and enterprise.
Define Design Language	Define the design language that describes the general foundations and re-usable components and patterns to use when creating design solutions.
Advocate User Perspective	Be the advocate for human understanding and empathy within product development and the enterprise.
Promote End-to-End Experience	Support a holistic and strategic approach on improving the experience of products and services along the customer journey.

| Aspect	Short summary
Drive Innovation	Drive the innovation of products, services and customer experiences forward with a human-centered perspective and a design-led approach.
Provide Creative Guidance	Provide creative leadership and direction by overseeing and guiding the outcomes of design work across multiple teams, products and initiatives.

QUESTIONS

- How are you currently approaching the area of Experience?
- Which aspects are working well?
- What are current challenges in this area?
- Which aspects are overlooked or neglected?

🖊 Your Notes

OPERATIONS

OVERVIEW
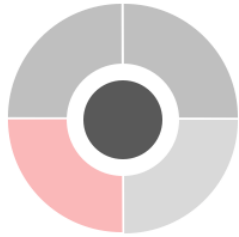
Leadership Mission: Define the organizational structures, processes, tools and work environment to support and manage the delivery of day-to-day design work. Enable creativity and ensure the health and stability of the team by letting designers focus on their craft.

Aspect	Short summary
Define Organizational Structure	Define the organizational structure, team setup and roles for your team.
Define Design Workflow	Define the typical design workflow including process phases, used methods and design deliverables.
Manage Work Streams	Set up the operational processes for project intake, staffing and resource allocation.
Facilitate Collaborative Design	Provide opportunities for collaborative design sessions and peer-to-peer problem solving regularly.
Define Work Environment	Define the physical work environment and the digital infrastructure and tools for your design team.

Aspect	Short summary
Ensure Design Coherence	Provide the necessary resources for designers (and developers) to create coherent solutions based on the defined principles, patterns and main building blocks of the designs.
Enable Knowledge Exchange	Foster the easy access to and exchange of existing knowledge, best practices and ways of working to ensure quality, efficiency and potential for innovation.
Assure Quality and Compliance	Define a process for quality assurance to ensure that shipped designs comply with the standards and guidelines defined by the design department.

QUESTIONS

- How are you currently approaching the area of Operations?
- Which aspects are working well?
- What are current challenges in this area?
- Which aspects are overlooked or neglected?

🖊 Your Notes

ENTERPRISE

OVERVIEW

Leadership Mission: Align the design team with other business functions and stakeholders and establish a design-led culture. Promote the capabilities of the design team and support enterprise challenges. Represent the design team both internally and externally.

Aspect	Short summary
Align with Business Strategy	Ensure that the goals and initiatives of the design team are in line with the overall business strategy.
Build Stakeholder Alliances	Build bridges and alliances to other departments as well as other executives and leaders actively.
Develop Design Culture	Promote design culture in the enterprise, so that everyone inside and outside the design team can understand the value of design.
Promote Design Capabilities	Ensure that the capabilities of the design team are understood and all relevant business functions know, when and how to involve the team.

Aspect	Short summary
Support Enterprise Challenges	Position and establish the design team as an important contributor to solve business problems and organizational challenges across the enterprise.
Build Design Reputation	Build reputation for your team - both internally and externally - to create visibility, attract potential talent and help to advance the field of design.

QUESTIONS

- How are you currently approaching the area of the Enterprise?
- Which aspects are working well?
- What are current challenges in this area?
- Which aspects are overlooked or neglected?

🖊 Your Notes

TEAM

OVERVIEW

Leadership Mission: Manage and build the design team so that everyone stays motivated and can grow. Foster an inspiring team culture and be a supportive leader that your team can trust. Make smart hiring decisions, ensure a smooth onboarding and define clear career paths.

Aspect	Short summary
Develop Team Culture	Foster shared values and rituals that keep the team healthy and happy. Support a positive, inspiring and trusting team spirit among designers in your organization.
Provide Feedback & Guidance	Provide professional feedback and support for your design staff and check in regularly to understand their current challenges, motivations and goals.
Plan and Scale Staffing Demand	Build and scale the design team that meets the enterprise's requirements in terms of needed headcount as well as necessary skills.
Manage Recruiting & Onboarding	Define the practices how new staff is attracted, assessed, hired and onboarded.

Aspect	Short summary
Foster Talent Growth	Support designers in growing both professionally and personally in their careers.
Reflect Leadership Skills	Assess and improve your skills for leading and managing the design team by actively gathering feedback and learning new abilities.
Manage External Partners	Build and manage successful relationships with necessary external partners.

QUESTIONS

- How are you currently approaching the area of the Team?
- Which aspects are working well?
- What are current challenges in this area?
- Which aspects are overlooked or neglected?

✏️ Your Notes

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katharina Koberdamm is a design consultant and lecturer living in Berlin. Her main topics are experience design, customer-centered innovation and design leadership.

She holds a degree in economics and has worked more than a decade in UX and design in both agencies and in-house teams. She teaches Human Computer Interaction and Innovation Design Management at the University of Applied Sciences Europe and other universities.

Her mission is to bridge the gap between business and design to support a common understanding between these disciplines. Katharina believes in human-centricity and values as the main driver of the work we do.

Website: https://designleadershipframework.de

IMPORTANT NOTICE

This is a beta version, which means the content is still work in progress. Please use it as your personal copy for education.

January 2021,

Katharina Koberdamm

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This is a selection of the resources that I find valuable. They are a good start to deep dive into the relevant topics of design leadership.

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