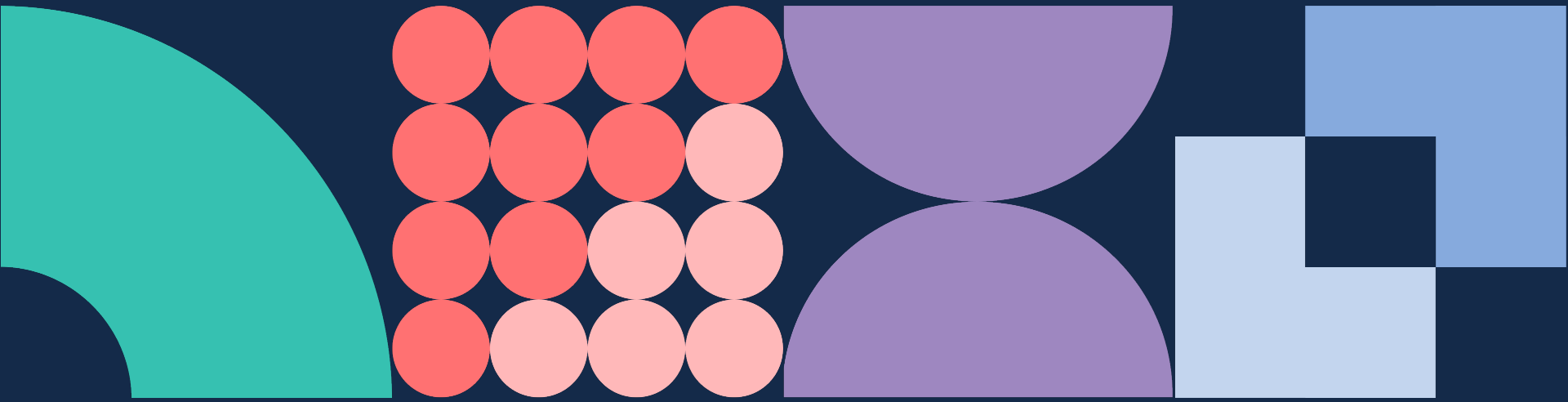




DLF Guide

A concise introduction to the Design Leadership Framework

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About the Framework

What the DLF is

Design leadership encompasses a wide range of responsibilities. The Design Leadership Framework brings structure to this complexity by organizing the work into five key dimensions: *Strategy, Experience, Operations, Team, and Enterprise*. These dimensions are further broken down into more specific aspects that clarify what to focus on.

The Design Leadership Framework is intended to be a descriptive, sense-making framework, not a prescriptive approach that you in some way "implement" in your team. It aims to be a guide to help design leaders navigate their role and make intentional choices about how they lead their team and move their organization forward.

How it was developed

The first version of the framework resulted from an extensive review of available literature and materials on design leadership, including more than 50 individual sources such as books, articles, and interviews with senior design leaders.

These insights were then structured into the Design Leadership Framework using card sorting techniques and other information architecture methods.

Over the following years, the framework was presented, discussed, and used in work with design leaders and teams, and further refined to achieve a balanced structure. The DLF is used by many design leaders worldwide to structure their approach.

The Five Dimensions

STRATEGY	EXPERIENCE	OPERATIONS	TEAM	ENTERPRISE
Developing the Design Organization Setting a clear vision and strategy for the design organization and the design work it produces. Executing this strategy effectively.	Shaping Products, Services, and Journeys Defining design excellence, strengthening a human-centered perspective, and guiding key design decisions.	Enabling Effective Design Work Establishing the structures, workflows, and tools that let design work run smoothly and enable creativity.	Leading and Developing People and Teams Building effective design teams, supporting the growth of the people within them, and creating an inspiring team culture.	Positioning Design for Meaningful Impact Establishing design as a trusted business partner that contributes to decisions across the organization.

THE DESIGN LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

STRATEGY	EXPERIENCE	OPERATIONS	TEAM	ENTERPRISE
Assess Current State	Develop Design Principles	Define Organizational Structure	Build and Scale Design Team	Align with Business & Technology
Define Vision & Goals	Define Design Language	Define Design Workflow	Manage Recruiting & Onboarding	Build Stakeholder Alliances
Develop Strategy & Roadmap	Advocate User Perspective	Manage Work Streams	Develop Design Team Culture	Advocate Value of Design
Drive Change	Promote End-to-End Experience	Ensure Coherence & Quality	Provide Feedback & Guidance	Promote Design Capabilities
Manage Program Initiatives	Drive Innovation	Define Work Environment	Foster Talent Growth	Support Enterprise Challenges
Measure Practice & Performance	Provide Creative Direction	Enable Knowledge Exchange	Advance Leadership Skills	Build Design Reputation

STRATEGY: Developing the Design Organization

ASPECT	DESCRIPTION
Assess Current State	Understand and synthesize the current challenges, opportunities, and influencing factors affecting your design organization.
Define Vision & Goals	Articulate a clear vision and long-term goals that guide design work, align the design team, and provide direction for leadership decisions.
Develop Strategy & Roadmap	Develop a strategy and high-level roadmap for moving the design organization to its desired future state.
Drive Change	Prepare, align, and support the team through upcoming changes.
Manage Program Initiatives	Set up and oversee the initiatives, projects, and work streams required to effectively implement the strategy.
Measure Practice & Performance	Regularly measure the impact of initiatives, assess the quality of design outcomes, and monitor the overall health of the team.

EXPERIENCE: Shaping Products, Services, and Journeys

ASPECT	DESCRIPTION
Develop Design Principles	Establish design principles and guidelines that define the core values and qualities you want to achieve in your products and services.
Define Design Language	Define a design language that outlines the visual and behavioral properties, elements, and patterns to be used consistently.
Advocate User Perspective	Actively represent user and customer perspectives, using insight and empathy to inform discussions and decisions.
Promote End-to-End Experience	Establish a holistic, journey-based view of the customer experience. Use it to drive cross-functional alignment and improve the experience end to end.
Drive Innovation	Promote a customer-centric, design-led approach as a key contributor to product and service innovation.
Provide Creative Direction	Set design direction and manage the quality of deliverables across multiple teams, products, and initiatives.

OPERATIONS: Enabling Effective Design Work

ASPECT	DESCRIPTION
Define Organizational Structure	Define the organizational structure of the design team, including roles, hierarchies, reporting lines, and team composition.
Define Design Workflow	Create a flexible blueprint for how design work moves from start to finish, including key steps, collaboration, and handoffs.
Manage Work Streams	Establish processes and tools for planning and managing work across projects and initiatives.
Ensure Coherence & Quality	Ensure that designers and relevant partners have the resources and rituals they need to produce coherent, high-quality results.
Define Work Environment	Create the physical work environment and digital infrastructure the team needs to work effectively.
Enable Knowledge Exchange	Provide access to relevant resources and enable the team to effectively document and share insights, results, and learnings.

TEAM: Leading and Developing People and Teams

ASPECT	DESCRIPTION
Build and Scale Design Team	Analyze, forecast, and plan the skills, roles, and capacity of the design team to support current and future work.
Manage Recruiting & Onboarding	Define clear processes and practices for recruiting and onboarding new team members and external partners.
Develop Design Team Culture	Promote shared values and rituals that support creativity, collaboration, and team health.
Provide Feedback & Guidance	Provide regular feedback and guidance, and actively engage with team members to understand their challenges, motivations, and goals.
Foster Talent Growth	Encourage and enable the professional development of team members to help them improve their skills and advance their careers.
Advance Leadership Skills	Continuously develop the skills necessary to effectively lead and support the team.

ENTERPRISE: Positioning Design for Meaningful Impact

ASPECT	DESCRIPTION
Align with Business & Technology	Align design work with business priorities and work closely with cross-functional partners.
Build Stakeholder Alliances	Build trusted relationships with key stakeholders throughout the organization.
Advocate Value of Design	Promote the value of customer centricity and a design-led approach throughout the organization.
Promote Design Capabilities	Make design's skills and accomplishments visible and help other functions use design effectively.
Support Enterprise Challenges	Establish the design team as a relevant contributor to business and organizational challenges.
Build Design Reputation	Build a strong external reputation for the design team to increase visibility while attracting talent and potential partners.

How to Read the Framework

Areas of Practice - Not Single Tasks

Each framework aspect represents a broader area of practice that includes various activities, methods, and tools. Many of these areas are substantial enough to fill entire books on their own.

Design-Specific and General Leadership

The framework combines responsibilities specific to leading design with those common across many leadership roles. This mix is intentional: it aims to provide a big picture of what design leaders need to address. What is not included are more administrative or organization-specific tasks.

Relevant for All Team Sizes

The aspects are relevant whether you are in a small team or a large organization. What changes is how they are addressed, depending on team size, design maturity, available resources, and expertise.

Responsibilities - Not Tools

The aspect names focus on the underlying goals of design leaders rather than specific methods, tools, or technologies. The responsibilities themselves remain stable. What changes is how the work is done, and which parts may increasingly be automated.

Ways to Use the Framework

These use cases often overlap and reinforce each other. Different ones become relevant at different times and for different types of challenges.

Educational Guide

A structured overview of what design leadership involves. It supports the transition from individual contributor to leader and creates a common language for discussing design leadership with your team and stakeholders.

Assessment Tool

Review each aspect and ask what is working well, what needs attention, and where blind spots may exist. This works as a quick scan or an in-depth inventory, individually or in workshops with your team.

Strategic Planning

Use the framework as a blueprint for building design capability. Not every aspect needs attention at once: decide consciously which to prioritize now and which to revisit later.

Role Clarification

Define the focus of your role and identify which aspects you could delegate. In teams with several leadership roles, use it to discuss how responsibilities are allocated.

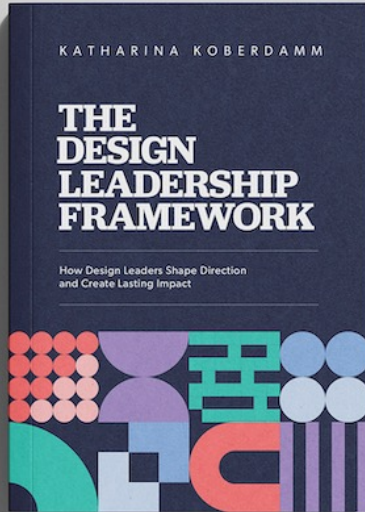
Professional Development

Reflect on where you feel confident, what energizes you, and where you want to deepen your understanding. Managers and coaches can use it to structure development conversations.

Knowledge Structure

Organize artifacts such as role definitions, assessments, roadmaps, org charts, and workflows along the framework to see how everything fits together.

Further Materials



About the Author



Katharina Koberdamm is a design leadership consultant with nearly 20 years of experience in digital product design and customer-centric innovation. She helps design leaders and organizations build high-performing teams and design the processes and structures that enable design excellence.

She developed the Design Leadership Framework, a comprehensive model that helps design leaders become more strategic and embrace the full scope of their role. Her work with the framework includes coaching and training design leaders. She teaches the Design Leadership Framework at ECAL Lausanne.

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Learn More



Templates, recommended reading, and upcoming events and classes on the Design Leadership Framework:

www.designleadershipframework.de

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