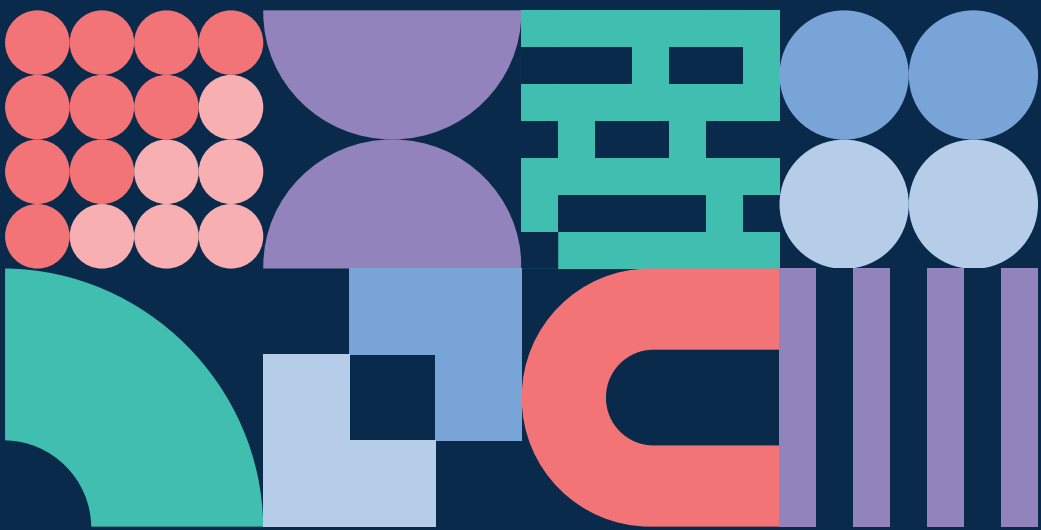
KATHARINA KOBERDAMM

THE DESIGN LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

How Design Leaders Shape Direction and Create Lasting Impact



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KATHARINA KOBERDAMM

The Design Leadership Framework

How Design Leaders Shape Direction and Create Lasting Impact

Reading Sample

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Preface

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What This Book Is About

Most design leaders come to their roles through talent and craft. They are strong designers. Then, one day, they find themselves in charge of a team, a function, or an organization. What often comes as a surprise is how multifaceted this leadership work is, and how little their design education and previous work experience prepared them for it.

I wrote this book to help fill that gap. Based on literature research and experience, *The Design Leadership Framework* goes beyond design craft and expertise to describe what the leadership role actually entails.

The framework is organized around five dimensions that design leaders have to master to create lasting impact: *Strategy*, *Experience*, *Operations*, *Team*, and *Enterprise*. Together they cover everything from setting direction and ensuring quality to improving operations, developing your team, and strengthening design's influence at the executive table.

These five dimensions are further broken down into 30 actionable aspects. For each aspect, I have compiled proven leadership concepts and best practices to help you design your approach. In addition, the Design Leadership Framework can serve as a practical tool in its own right: a checklist for assessing your organization, a blueprint for sharpening your strategy, and a guide for clarifying leadership roles within your team.

This book is meant to be a reference you can return to whenever your role shifts or a new challenge appears. Some parts you will work through in depth, others you might only consult for a specific decision. Either way, it can help you take a more strategic view of your work and focus your attention where it matters most.

Why I Wrote This Book

I can trace the origins of the Design Leadership Framework (DLF) back to a surprisingly specific moment. I was browsing through my now-husband's library of tech books when I came across a book on IT architecture.

As I flipped through the pages, I was struck by the variety of frameworks and models it offered. Some outlined IT management responsibilities, others described principles and meta-models for building effec-

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tive IT functions. I was impressed by the strong focus on strategy and business alignment. Looking further, I realized that other disciplines such as product management or human resources (HR) used extensive management frameworks as well.[1]

Almost immediately, I began drawing parallels to my own profession in design and user experience (UX). What models and frameworks did we have to support people in becoming better design leaders?

At first, I thought of familiar frameworks such as user-centered design, design innovation, or journey management. Digging deeper, I also found models that addressed design operations, design maturity, and team organization. But none of them offered the kind of meta-perspective I was looking for: an overview that made it easier to understand where topics like shaping design processes or improving team structures fit into the overall role of a design leader.

Simply put, I wanted to understand: If I'm a design leader, what's on my plate? What is expected of me? How do I effectively lead a design organization?[2]

If I was asking these questions, I assumed others were too. And as someone who has always enjoyed developing tools and models, this curiosity quickly turned into a project.

My goal was to identify the key focus areas and responsibilities of design leaders, organize them into a clear structure, and learn from the practices of successful design leaders and teams. I also wanted to draw on my own background in design and UX, shaped by years of working on digital products and services.

But I wanted to approach the framework research with a beginner's mind, looking beyond my own experience and the particular contexts in which I had worked. So I began with an extensive review of books, articles, and other materials on design leadership, which formed the basis for the first version of the framework.

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1 Such as Gartner's Product Management Framework, McLean & Company's HR Framework, or Info-Tech Research Group's IT Management & Governance Framework.

2 I use leadership as the overarching term for the framework, even though some aspects focus more on leading, others more on managing. In practice, this distinction is hard to maintain. As Peter Drucker already wrote in *The Practice of Management* (1954), leadership is an integral part of every manager's role, and vice versa.

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A few months later, I found myself on a train, nervously tweaking my slides and rehearsing my talk. I was about to present the Design Leadership Framework for the first time at the Intersection Conference in Prague. When I went on stage, I was not sure if it would resonate. But the response was very positive and the audience stayed engaged well beyond the talk itself.[3]

Fast-forward a few years. As I write this book, the same talk has thousands of views on YouTube and has opened many doors: speaking engagements, publications, and university teaching positions. Through its online resources, the DLF has been used by hundreds of design leaders and teams around the world. I have had the privilege of working closely with several of them, gathering feedback and continually refining both the framework itself and its practical application.

Over time, I also received personal messages from design leaders who shared how useful they found the framework and how closely it reflected their own experiences building and leading design organizations. Feedback like this ultimately encouraged me to bring all of this research and experience together in this book.

Who This Book Is For

The Design Leadership Framework is tailored for current and aspiring design leaders working in in-house teams or agencies that design primarily digital products and services.[4] The book assumes an environment where design teams work closely with functions such as product management, engineering, marketing, and customer experience (CX).

In this context, design teams typically work on existing and new products, services, or touchpoints.[5] Sometimes, a smaller portion of the design team is also involved in addressing broader enterprise-level challenges.

The framework is suitable for all stages of design maturity and team sizes. It can support teams that are just beginning to professionalize and

3 Koberdamm, K. (2018) The Design Leadership Framework. YouTube.

4 Including combinations of hardware and software, digital and physical.

5 This translates to design disciplines such as product design, user experience design, service design, content design, or communication design.

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scale, as well as leaders managing large and established design organizations.

Heads of Design

The framework will be most valuable if you are responsible for developing and managing a design team and design organization. This includes roles such as vice president (VP) of design, head of design, design director, or similar titles. These positions typically have broad influence over strategy, structure, and practice, making it possible to apply the framework holistically.

Design Managers

More specialized leadership roles, such as team leader, design manager, creative director, design operations manager, or design program manager, will benefit from chapters dedicated to their specific areas of focus.

Design Stakeholders

The DLF can also be valuable for design's partners across the enterprise, including product managers, product owners, engineers, and colleagues in CX and marketing.

While these disciplines work closely together to build meaningful products and services, they often lack a shared understanding of each other's expertise and responsibilities. The framework can help create a clearer picture of what design leadership entails, supporting more effective collaboration and alignment across functions, just as design leaders benefit from understanding the priorities of their cross-functional partners.

Human Resources

Finally, the framework can benefit HR teams involved in recruiting, developing, or supporting design leaders. It provides them with a clearer understanding of the scope and focus areas of design leadership roles.

Other Design Disciplines

For design teams working primarily in fields such as industrial design, graphic design, interior design, or related fields, much of the framework

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may still be relevant. However, some aspects may not fit these contexts perfectly because the research behind the framework did not focus specifically on these disciplines. That said, I have used the framework with professionals in some of these fields, and many have been able to adapt it to their context with little effort.

How This Book Is Structured

This book is organized to give you a complete tour of the Design Leadership Framework.

Chapter 1 introduces the framework and explains how it is structured, what it covers, and how design leaders can use and benefit from it.

Chapters 2–6 are the heart of the book. Each chapter takes a deep dive into one dimension of the DLF, walking through its aspects one by one. Every aspect follows the same structure:

- **What This Is About:** the context and thinking behind the aspect
- **Key Focus Areas:** concrete starting points for putting it into action
- **Who to Involve:** the people worth bringing into the process
- **Further Resources:** books, articles, and tools if you want to go deeper

Because each aspect is written to work on its own, some ideas may appear more than once in closely related sections. Read the chapters in order, or go directly to the aspect that interests you most.

Chapter 7 presents a selection of scenarios and challenges design teams face and how the DLF can add value in these situations.

Chapter 8 focuses on practical guidance, from taking others with you and adapting the framework to different contexts, to linking it to the wider organization and your ongoing leadership practice.

The appendix provides supporting materials and templates, as well as a list of references.

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A Note to the Reader

There are many excellent books on the craft and methods of design. This book takes a different perspective. It focuses on the work involved in leading effective design teams and organizations so that they can deliver meaningful results and create lasting impact.

My intention was to create a book that could become a trusted companion as you navigate the challenges of design leadership. As you develop your own approach and build your toolbox as a leader, I hope this book contributes to your confidence and success.

Katharina Koberdamm

Online Resources

Further reading, templates, and related materials are also available on the Design Leadership Framework website:

▶ https://designleadershipframework.de/resources/

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CHAPTER 1

The Design Leadership Framework

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The Reality of Leading Design

Over the past few years, I have had the privilege of getting to know many design leaders through team workshops, leadership training, conference presentations, and one-on-one coaching. They worked in very different contexts: in-house teams and agencies, small teams and large organizations, startups and complex enterprises. Yet despite these differences, their stories and challenges were often surprisingly similar.

Some were stepping into a leadership role for the first time and struggling with the transition from individual contributor to manager, not knowing exactly what was expected of them and where to start. Some struggled to maintain quality and alignment as their teams grew or became more distributed.

Others felt that their team's potential was not fully recognized and found themselves constantly advocating for design in strongly engineering- or business-driven cultures. Efforts to become more influential or strategic were often held back by a lack of stakeholder buy-in and limited budgets.

Many also reported spending much of their time working hands-on in projects and teams, leaving little time for their core leadership responsibilities. In different ways, they all described their roles as demanding, requiring them to wear many different hats and to respond to stakeholder expectations rather than acting on what they thought was best.

It's true that the role of a design leader can be quite broad. They are asked to ensure design quality at scale, champion customer centricity, and enable innovation. They collaborate across disciplines, build an inspiring team culture, and support long-term talent development. They are responsible for designing the systems, structures, and processes that make their design organizations work, and for managing the people who work within them. They must keep up with trends, technologies, and developments in their industry and in society at large.

At the same time, many enter this role with limited formal training in leadership or management, a lack of basic business and management concepts, and little guidance on how to navigate the complexities of the enterprise.

This is a fundamental difference from other business disciplines such as HR, finance, product, or marketing. There, a business degree is

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typically the standard entry qualification, providing people with an established management foundation before they step into leadership roles.

Most of the leaders I meet are highly skilled in their craft and deeply committed to their teams. What's often missing is clarity: an understanding of their sphere of influence, a sense of where to focus their efforts, and a vision for leading design within the organization.

Patterns Reflected in Research

This experience is also reflected in broader industry data. The Swedish *State of Design* study, for example, identified several major contributors to stress among design leaders: unclear expectations and responsibilities, limited control, frequent context switching, and a persistent lack of time.[1] These pressures are often compounded by high workloads, organizational change, budget constraints, and the realities of company politics.

The study *Burnout in Design* by researcher Mariana Esquer points to similar patterns. It shows how exhausting it can be for designers and design leaders to constantly communicate the value of design and adapt to stakeholder demands.[2]

There is also another, more subtle tension at play. Design is a creative discipline, and many are drawn to it because they value curiosity and experimentation. Stepping into a leadership role can therefore feel difficult, as the structure and direction involved can seem at odds with the exploratory nature and openness of creative work. As John Maeda and Becky Bermont observe in *Redesigning Leadership*, "The word leadership is something of an anathema to creative folks as it invokes an image of authority and order over the chaos that we thrive upon."[3]

I have also heard this concern expressed several times. Some design leaders describe feeling uncomfortable setting a clear course or making firm decisions. They want to remain collaborative and open at all times, believing that their teams neither want nor need "leadership." This belief often stems from the misconception that leadership is synonymous with control. Many lack role models for what strong, supportive leadership can look like in a design context.

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1 Design Leadership Community Sweden (2024) State of Design Report
2 Esquer, M. (2024) Burnout in Design
3 Maeda, J. and Bermont, B. (2011) Redesigning Leadership

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From Reacting to Leading

I believe that design leaders can achieve greater success by taking a more strategic and proactive leadership approach. This means taking ownership of where their design organizations are going, rather than being driven primarily by the demands of others. It means becoming more intentional about how they lead, uniting teams behind a strong vision, and providing direction where it is needed. It also means acting as a clear and supportive leader for their design team and aligning with stakeholders without becoming overly accommodating.

The Design Leadership Framework introduced in the following pages is designed to support this shift. It provides a structured view of the role, showing the areas design leaders can influence, the responsibilities involved in building and developing strong design organizations, and the practices that can help them succeed. It aims to bring clarity and focus to a role that can often feel broad and loosely defined.

Before looking at the framework itself, it is helpful to clarify some terms used throughout this book.

Design Leadership Terms

Design Team refers to the people doing design work, including designers, researchers, and related roles.

Design Organization encompasses the strategy, structures, systems, processes, practices, people, and culture through which design operates within the enterprise to create value.

Design Function describes the mandate of design within an organization, including its purpose, scope, and contribution to business goals.

Design Capability reflects an organization's ability to apply design effectively, as measured by its capabilities, design maturity, quality of results, and impact over time.

Design Leadership can refer to the people responsible for leading a design team or organization, and to the overall practice of doing so. In business management, it can also describe a strategy that uses design to gain competitive advantage.[4] In this book, we focus on the first meaning.

4 In German, this distinction is easier to grasp: *Designführung* (practice) versus *Designführerschaft* (strategy).

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Introducing the Design Leadership Framework

What Is a Framework?

A framework is defined as a supporting structure around which something can be built.[5] It is less specific than a concrete method or process. Instead, it organizes related concepts around a topic and helps make sense of them.[6] Frameworks should provide orientation and guidance without being too rigid. They rely on their users to adapt them to their context while working within the structure they provide.[7]

Frameworks fall into two broad categories. Some frameworks are more *prescriptive*, introducing specific ways of working, roles, or procedures. Others are more *descriptive*, helping people organize and understand a domain without dictating a fixed way of working. Both types of frameworks are used across many domains, including business, design, IT, law, and science.[8]

Developing the Framework

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.

To arrive at this structure, I combined several methods of research and synthesis. The first version resulted from an extensive review of available literature and materials on design leadership. I reviewed more than 50 individual sources, including books and articles, as well as selected interviews with senior design leaders. During this research, I

5 Definition of *framework* in the Cambridge Dictionary.

6 Dash, S. (2019) The DesOps Enterprise: The Overview & Culture

7 Zoughaib, M. (2016) Project Management Framework Automation for Project and Portfolio Management

8 Prominent examples include the Business Model Canvas, the McKinsey 7S Framework, Scrum, the Double Diamond, Jobs to Be Done, and COBIT.

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collected every mention of specific activities and responsibilities of design leaders. This resulted in nearly 500 individual entries in a spreadsheet.

I then used information architecture methods such as physical card sorting to allow patterns to appear from the material itself. These clusters became the first version of the aspects of the framework, which I then further grouped into broader dimensions.

That first version was just a starting point. Over the next few years, I presented the framework several times, gathered feedback, and used it in my work with design leaders and teams. During this time, it was further refined to achieve a balanced structure.

Writing this book then meant another round of research, gathering best practices, examples, and supporting literature for each area of the framework. The full list of sources cited is included in the appendix. What emerged from this process is the framework I will walk you through in the following pages.

How the Framework Structures Design Leadership

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.*

Each dimension plays a critical role in driving impact and influencing how design works within an organization. To make the framework more actionable, the dimensions are further broken down into more specific *aspects* that clarify what to focus on.

The following table summarizes the key dimensions and aspects in one place. It is the central view of the Design Leadership Framework and serves as a compact reference for understanding the scope of the role and mandate. Each dimension is briefly introduced on the following pages.

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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**

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STRATEGY:
Developing the Design Organization

Strong design leadership starts with a clear vision and an actionable strategy. Design leaders are responsible for setting the direction for their design organization and the design work it produces.

This involves asking fundamental questions: What is our vision and long-term ambition for the design team and its results? How will we evolve our design organization and strengthen our design capabilities over time? How will we ensure that design has a meaningful impact on customers and the business?

A well-defined strategy provides orientation and focus. It guides decision-making, aligns leadership activities, and establishes a clear path forward. Its influence extends across all other dimensions of the framework.

On a practical level, this dimension covers six key aspects of strategy work, from gathering initial insights and ideas, to defining a vision and a high-level plan, to successful implementation.

TABLE 1: Overview of Strategy aspects

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.

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EXPERIENCE:
Shaping Products, Services, and Journeys

Design leadership is most visible in the products, services, and touchpoints that people interact with and that shape the customer and brand experience. Design leaders play a key role in defining what design excellence means for their organization and providing the creative direction needed to bring it to life across teams and initiatives.

At the same time, their responsibilities extend beyond aesthetics. Design leaders play a key role in ensuring that the customer's perspective, based on insight and empathy, is consistently integrated into the work. This helps ensure that both the visual and functional aspects of the resulting solutions are aligned with real customer needs and contribute to meaningful innovation.

Within the DLF, the *Experience* dimension consists of six key aspects that help design leaders move from isolated design decisions toward a more holistic approach to delivering consistent, high-quality design outcomes.

TABLE 2: Overview of Experience aspects

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.

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OPERATIONS:
Enabling Effective Design Work

As design organizations grow to support multiple products, projects, or teams, it becomes essential for design leaders to focus on professionalizing and managing design operations. This includes defining clear organizational structures and roles, establishing effective ways of working, and providing the tools and systems to support day-to-day operations.

This allows designers and researchers to focus their energy on their tasks and craft, collaborate effectively, and deliver results without unnecessary friction. Strong operational foundations create clarity and reliability in how work gets done, supporting both the quality of design outcomes and the stability of the team.

Within the Design Leadership Framework, the *Operations* dimension consists of six key aspects that help design leaders move from ad hoc coordination to more reliable and efficient structures and processes.

TABLE 3: Overview of Operations aspects

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.

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TEAM:
Leading and Developing People and Teams

Being a design leader also means building and developing effective design teams and supporting the individuals within them.

This includes being intentional about team composition and required skills, making thoughtful hiring decisions, and supporting effective onboarding. Design leaders also shape the culture of design teams, creating the conditions for creativity and collaboration to thrive.

When working with individual team members, design leaders provide regular feedback, guidance, and professional development, while continuing to develop their own leadership skills.

Within the DLF, the *Team* dimension consists of six key aspects that cover both the management of individual team members and the team as a whole.

TABLE 4: Overview of Team aspects

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.

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ENTERPRISE:
Positioning Design for Meaningful Impact

Being an effective leader means bringing people along and engaging them in a common direction. For design leaders, this means helping others understand the role design can play, the value it can add, and how it contributes to customer satisfaction and business results.

Establishing design as a key business partner across the enterprise is not trivial, though. It requires building trust and alignment with other functions and key stakeholders to ensure that design's perspective is considered when important decisions are made.

Over time, this expands the role of design beyond aesthetics and execution to represent customer needs, contribute to innovation, and address enterprise-level challenges.

Within the Design Leadership Framework, the *Enterprise* dimension consists of six key aspects that help design leaders strengthen the customer perspective and enable design and research to realize their full potential.

TABLE 5: Overview of Enterprise aspects

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.

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How the Framework Can Help You

After this initial orientation to the Design Leadership Framework, you may already be thinking about where it can support you and your team. Perhaps it has inspired you to reflect on your own role, or given you some ideas about where your design organization could benefit from more attention.

When I first developed the framework, the primary use cases I had in mind were gaining clarity about one's role and using it as an assessment tool. However, as I began to work with design leaders and teams, it became clear that it could be used in many additional ways. Over time, design leaders have written to me about how they have used the DLF in their own work. Here are a few examples:

- A design leader stepping into a new role used the DLF to guide their first weeks, exploring how each aspect was currently handled and using it to identify the questions to ask and information to gather.
- A design manager used the framework to support their own professional development by identifying areas in which they wanted to deepen their expertise.
- One design leader used the framework to prepare for an interview for a design leadership position, using it to think more broadly about the responsibilities and expectations of the role.
- An agency leader used the framework as the basis for development discussions with their team leaders.
- One design manager used the Design Leadership Framework to identify gaps in their current design strategy.

Through feedback like this and my own work with the framework, I have identified six main types of applications, as shown in the following overview.

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FIGURE 1: Common ways to use the Design Leadership Framework

These use cases often overlap and reinforce each other. Different ones become relevant at different times and for different types of challenges. You may start by using the framework and this book to learn more about design leadership, later assess your team's current state, and return to it when shaping priorities or clarifying responsibilities.

Educational Guide

The framework provides a structured overview of what design leadership involves. Together with the approaches and best practices collected for each aspect, it provides a concise introduction to the field and helps both new and experienced design leaders better understand their role and what it entails. For emerging design leaders, it can support the transition from individual contributor to leader by providing a clearer sense of what to expect and how to prepare. The framework also creates a common language for discussing design leadership, both within your team and with stakeholders who may be less familiar with the discipline.

Assessment Tool

Once you have a clear understanding of the framework and its key areas, you can begin to apply it to your own team and organization. The framework table can serve as a useful assessment tool, helping you review each aspect and ask what is working well, what needs attention, and where blind spots may exist. These insights can provide an important foundation for strategy and planning.

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In practice, this DLF assessment can be performed in several ways, from a quick scan to a more thorough analysis or even an in-depth inventory across all framework aspects. It can be completed individually or used in workshops or surveys to bring in the team perspective and develop a shared view of the current state.[9]

Strategic Planning

The framework's overview of design leadership can also be seen as a blueprint for building design capability. But not in the sense that all aspects need to be addressed at the same time. You are likely to find that many are already working well in your team, while others may be less relevant in your current context. The point is to make conscious decisions about which aspects to prioritize now and which to revisit later. Strategy is about focusing on what matters most.

The six *Strategy* aspects of the DLF provide a structured yet flexible approach to this work, guiding you from understanding the current state to setting direction, planning initiatives, driving change, and measuring progress.[10]

Role Clarification

The DLF can be a useful tool for clarifying roles and responsibilities. This is especially important when design leadership is shared among several people, or when the role itself needs to be more clearly defined.

If you are the only design leader on your team, the framework can help you define the focus of your role and identify which aspects you could potentially delegate. In teams with multiple leadership roles, such as head of design, team manager, or research lead, it can support discussions about how to allocate responsibilities and help refine existing role descriptions.[11]

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9 See also: *Assess Current State* and the appendix for templates and instructions

10 See also: Chapter 2, *Strategy*, and Chapter 7, *Different Teams, Different Challenges*

11 See also: *Define Organizational Structure*

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Professional Development

The framework can support your own learning and professional growth by helping you reflect on your leadership role and identify where you feel confident, what energizes you, and where you may want to deepen your understanding.[12]

It also works well when managing other design leaders, supporting newly appointed leaders, or preparing senior contributors for a leadership role. Managers and coaches can use it to structure conversations, surface areas for development, and link individual growth to broader leadership responsibilities.

Knowledge Structure

The framework can also serve as a central structure for organizing and connecting data and materials related to the design organization. It can help bring relevant artifacts such as role definitions, team assessments, roadmaps, organizational charts, design workflows, or competency frameworks into a more cohesive view of how everything fits together. For your own work, it can also help structure your collection of links, notes, examples, and references related to your team.[13]

Which of these use cases is most relevant to you will depend on your current situation and the challenges you face. You can use the framework and this book in different ways as your role and priorities evolve, and you may find entirely new ways to make it useful in your own context.

12 See also: *Advance Leadership Skills, Appendix Templates*

13 See also: *Enable Knowledge Exchange*

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Drive Change

What This Is About

Change is an inevitable part of executing a strategy.[32] Whether it is introducing new tools or redefining processes, these types of changes are never trivial. Design leaders must make a conscious effort to guide their teams through the necessary transitions and the uncertainty that can accompany them.[33] This practice is called change management. Done well, it can significantly increase the overall team buy-in to your plans.[34]

Traditional change management often focuses on large, enterprise-wide reorganizations. This overlooks the fact that smaller initiatives can have just as much impact on individuals and teams. Design leaders regularly navigate change that can have a profound effect on the people involved:

- A team that has spent years building expertise and workflows around a particular design tool is asked to migrate to a new tool. Experienced designers face a steep learning curve and may feel that the skills they have carefully developed are suddenly less relevant.
- A decision is made to integrate AI tools into the design workflow. Some designers worry that their skills will become obsolete, that their role will change, or that they will lose their jobs in the long run. Others feel insecure about design quality and their contribution to the process.
- A reorganization means that designers no longer work in a central design unit, but are embedded in product teams. They lose daily contact with design peers and worry about becoming isolated or losing opportunities for professional growth.

Initial resistance to change is natural. People form strong attachments to familiar ways of working, and anything new can trigger a range

32 Recklies, D. (2015) Strategy and Change – Natural Order or Chicken-and-Egg Problem?

33 Schichtel, A. (2016) Change Management für Dummies

34 While the next aspect, *Manage Program Initiatives,* discusses the practical side of implementing a strategy, this aspect focuses on the human dimension of change.

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of emotions. There are many reasons for this, including uncertainty about the future, a sense of loss of control, or concerns about remaining competent. Change also simply creates more work in the short term, and that alone is a powerful source of friction.[35]

A useful model for understanding the emotional journey people go through is the Kübler-Ross Change Curve.[36] Originally developed to describe the emotional stages people go through when faced with death and significant loss, it was later found to be equally applicable to organizational change and has since been adapted in many ways. The following figure shows a simplified version based on the work of Kübler-Ross.

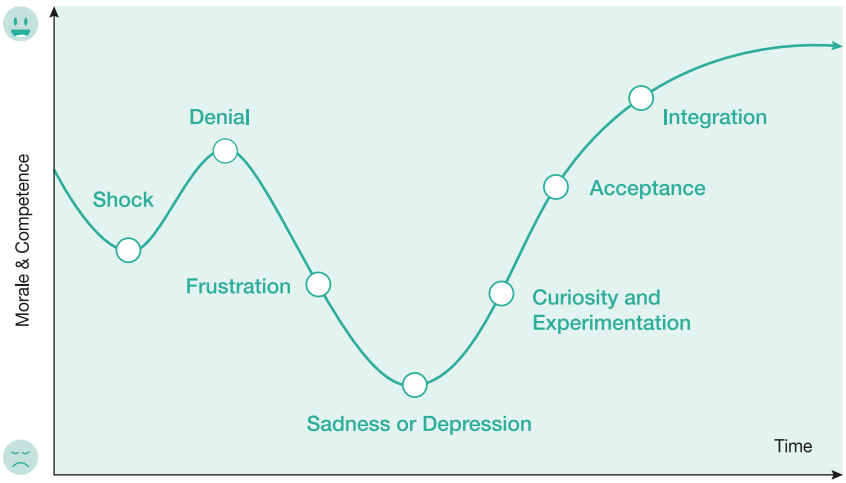


FIGURE 10: Emotional Change Curve, own illustration adapted from the five stages of grief (Kübler-Ross, 1969) as widely applied in change management.

When change is first introduced, people often react with shock, followed by a brief period of denial, sometimes refusing to believe that the change is actually happening. As reality sets in, concern and frustration grow, and people may feel sad or depressed at their lowest point, even if the change is ultimately positive. Once the change is accepted as inevitable, people begin to test what it means for them, experiment with new ways of working, and begin to see possibilities. A sense of "I can do

35 Kanter, R.M., cited in Stanford, N. (2005) Organization Design
36 Kübler-Ross, E. (n.d.) Kübler-Ross Change Curve

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this" gradually leads to acceptance and eventually integration: the point at which the new way of working becomes the norm.

As a design leader, you cannot prevent this curve, but you can help guide it and make the dip as shallow as possible. Good change management starts early, ideally involving your team in strategy development rather than presenting a finished plan. For any major change, make your communication crystal clear: what is changing, why it matters, what the timeline is, what the vision is, and where people can contribute.[37] Team involvement can take many forms, from communicating early and making space for questions and concerns, to actively soliciting input and feedback on how to design and implement the change.

When people are frustrated or at a low point, address their concerns with open and constructive conversations rather than avoiding them. To support the experimentation phase, offer training and guidance to help people become familiar with new tools or ways of working. Keep the team informed throughout with regular updates, and when milestones are reached or a change is successfully embedded, take the time to recognize and celebrate the effort.

Change Management Gone Wrong

An experience from my own work illustrates what happens when this type of change communication is underestimated. As a consultant, I was working on the implementation of new digital workplace tools for a mid-sized company. We analyzed use cases, selected a set of tools, and developed a clear vision of how they would be used and what outcomes we wanted to achieve. What we had not planned properly was how to communicate the rollout itself, so it ended up being a single short email from senior management with no guidance on how to use the tools. Not surprisingly, adoption was poor. It taught me that even the best-prepared changes will fall flat without a proper communication plan.

37 This and the following paragraph draw on Stanford, N. (2005) Organization Design and Schichtel, A. (2016) Change Management für Dummies.

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As professor Willie Pietersen puts it: "However much we recognize the need for progress and appreciate the benefits it brings, we dislike change."[38] That is why I believe that understanding the emotional change curve and knowing some basic change management techniques should be in every design leader's toolbox.

Key Focus Areas

Here's a summary of the most important starting points and best practices to help you address this aspect in your team:

- **Understand change processes:** Familiarize yourself with well-known change management models to understand the emotional journey your team will go through and how to support them effectively. Expect people to react with a range of emotions, from excitement to resistance.[39]
- **Communicate proactively:** Keep your team informed about important upcoming initiatives and changes, especially those that affect their work or team structure. This can reduce uncertainty and ensure alignment.[40] Clearly communicate *why* change is needed, what it will look like, how you plan to get there, and how everyone can participate.[41]
- **Inform stakeholders:** Identify the stakeholders who will be affected by the change and get them on board early. Gather their thoughts and feedback, ensure buy-in, and adjust your approach as needed.
- **Engage your team:** Provide opportunities for the team to participate in shaping the future of the design organization. Offer workshops and meetings to gather diverse perspectives and ideas. Provide feedback channels or one-on-one meetings to discuss individual concerns. Manage expectations and address issues before they escalate.

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38 Pietersen, W. (2002) The Mark Twain Dilemma: The Theory and Practice of Change Leadership

39 For example, Kübler-Ross Change Curve; Lewin's 3-Phase Model; Kotter's 8-Step Model.

40 This section draws on Schichtel, A. (2016) Change Management für Dummies.

41 Hays, G. (2015) Communicating Change: The 4P Model

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- **Have one-on-one conversations:** People need to feel heard. Do not avoid difficult conversations with team members who are struggling. Listen to their concerns, seek constructive solutions, and, when possible, offer compromises or alternatives, whether that means adjusting responsibilities, facilitating a team transfer, or finding other accommodations.
- **Run experiments and pilots:** Try out a new approach or tool on a smaller scale to gain insights before a full rollout, for example, within a specific project or team.[42]
- **Build confidence and skills:** Ensure that your team has the skills and knowledge necessary to successfully adopt the change. Provide training, create comprehensive documentation, and encourage peer learning to embed new ways of working into daily operations.[43]
- **Celebrate milestones and recognize efforts:** Reinforce change by regularly celebrating milestones and recognizing achievements. This can include shout-outs at team meetings, personalized thank-you notes, team events, team swag, or other forms of recognition or reward.
- **Measure impact:** Evaluate the success of your initiatives to ensure continuous improvement. You can also gather feedback on the change process itself.[44]

Who to Involve

HR can help develop communication strategies, address employee concerns, and provide general change management support. They can also ensure that organizational changes are implemented in compliance with laws and company policies.

42 See also: *Manage Program Initiatives*
43 See also: *Enable Knowledge Exchange*
44 See also: *Measure Practice & Performance*

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Provide Feedback & Guidance

What This Is About

Giving feedback and guidance is an essential part of being a design leader. It directly influences the quality of outcomes your team produces and shapes how individuals grow over time.

At its core, feedback is about making things visible that would otherwise remain unnoticed. Much of what shapes someone's effectiveness may not be obvious to them. A model often cited in this context is the Johari Window. It was developed by psychologists Luft and Ingham and distinguishes between what is known and unknown to ourselves and to others. Feedback helps uncover the blind spots people have about themselves, giving them something they can reflect on and work with.[40]

Design leaders are responsible for giving feedback that touches on all relevant parts of their team members' work and professional development. This ranges from situation-related feedback that aims to improve a specific outcome to more developmental feedback that looks at overall contribution and impact. In this way, feedback also plays an important role in talent development, helping people understand where they stand and how they can grow further. The following table outlines these different kinds of feedback.

TABLE 11: Situational and developmental feedback

Situational Feedback	Developmental Feedback
Concerns a specific outcome, activity, or situation, whether positive or negative.	Concerns broader patterns in someone's contribution, behavior, or development.
Takes place in reviews, critiques, project meetings, or informal conversations.	Takes place in 1:1s, performance reviews, or dedicated feedback conversations.
Looks at quality, approach, rationale, or communication.	Looks at overall impact, strengths, growth areas, and critical issues.

40 Luft, J. (1961) The Johari Window: A Graphic Model of Awareness in Interpersonal Relations.

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Situational Feedback	Developmental Feedback
Needs clear criteria and concrete, actionable input.	Needs specific guidance, clear expectations, or long-term goals.
Improves the immediate outcome and strengthens future work.	Supports the person's longer-term growth and career progression.

Giving good feedback can be incredibly challenging, especially when it comes to sensitive topics such as quality issues or behavioral red flags. As Kim Scott, author of *Radical Candor*, points out, managers often fall into two unhelpful behaviors: saying nothing to avoid conflict or delivering feedback too harshly. Neither approach will yield the best results.[41]

Most of us have seen this play out. A colleague who is not performing well, but no one addresses it directly. Conversations happening behind a person's back instead of with them. Or situations where feedback is delivered with frustration or irritation, and even if the point is valid, the way it is communicated damages the relationship. It takes experience and reflection to develop the mindset that "feedback is a gift," both when giving and receiving it. Personally, it took me years to become more comfortable with it, and it still requires conscious effort.

Between any leader and a member of the team, feedback also does not happen on neutral ground. There is an inherent hierarchy, with different levels of responsibility and accountability, which can lead to hesitation on both sides. People may hold back concerns, soften their message, or avoid certain topics altogether. Being aware of this dynamic is essential. While it cannot be removed, you can work to reduce its negative effects by building trust, inviting openness, and making it clear that feedback can flow in both directions. Receiving feedback is equally important if you want to grow as a design leader and improve your team and organization.

For feedback and guidance to be effective, they need to be part of an ongoing practice. To understand how to implement this, it helps to distinguish again between the two types of feedback introduced earlier. Situational feedback on the work usually happens in design reviews

41 Scott, K. (2019) Radical Candor

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and critiques, in project meetings, or in short informal sessions. As the aspect *Provide Creative Direction* describes in more detail, design leaders need to deliver concrete and actionable feedback based on transparent criteria.

Developmental feedback and guidance for the person are different. They concern broader patterns and topics, such as the overall quality of someone's work, current conflicts, and career direction. These conversations need a more personal setting. Regular 1:1 meetings provide this space, allowing leaders to connect individually, discuss what is going well, understand where challenges exist, and clarify what support is needed.

Regular 1:1s are an opportunity to build a relationship with your team members and help them grow in their role. They also offer a more private setting in which uncomfortable topics can be discussed, whether they concern recurring quality issues, missed expectations, or problematic behavior. Approaching these conversations – both positive and challenging – with the mindset of a coach and mentor, asking questions, listening carefully, and offering guidance when needed, helps people move forward constructively.

In many situations, team members will come with concerns or obstacles they cannot resolve on their own. Being available and approachable in these moments can make a real difference. Sometimes this will result in helping someone think through a problem and letting them find their own approach. At other times, it requires sharing your experience, suggesting a solution, or stepping in more directly to remove blockers.

As leadership author Julie Zhuo writes in *The Making of a Manager*, a major part of your job as a leader is to ensure that the people you support can thrive.[42] Feedback and guidance play a central role in this.

42 Zhuo, J. (2019) The Making of a Manager

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Building Foundations as a Small Team

In this situation, design teams are typically small, ranging from a single design leader working alone to a leader with a team of a few people. These design leaders are often relatively new to leadership and may not even have formal leadership titles. They are usually still deeply involved in hands-on design or research.

Design roles in these environments tend to be generalist. Organizational design maturity is low to medium, with design viewed primarily as a support function to product, engineering, or marketing. As a result, design leaders often need to explain design capabilities and actively advocate for earlier involvement and more resources.

In many cases, stakeholder demands strongly influence priorities, and established processes, standards, or ways of working are still evolving or missing altogether. Delivery pressures are typically high, and team members are often stretched across multiple projects and responsibilities. This leaves limited time for foundational work and long-term capability building. Progress tends to depend heavily on individual initiative, experience, and personal relationships within the organization.

How Design Leaders Use the Framework

Design leaders in these settings often start by using the framework for an initial assessment of the current state, either individually or together with the team in a workshop setting. Used in this way, the framework helps create a shared understanding of where the team stands and makes critical gaps more visible.

From there, the framework can help structure conversations about priorities and direction within the team and with stakeholders. It can also help make the case for investing in team growth, design capabilities, or process improvements.

Rather than launching a full strategy process, design leaders in this situation usually need to take a more pragmatic approach. Capacity is often limited, so the focus should be on a small number of high-impact priorities.

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Design leaders may articulate a light vision and then plan only a few focused initiatives to move the team forward. These efforts may be driven directly by the design leader or supported by senior members of the team.

Working on these initiatives can easily get lost in the day-to-day. By reserving a block of time each week to work on them, design leaders can be more consistent in developing their design organization. Tracking a small number of success indicators can be helpful in demonstrating progress and making the case for future investment.

Aspects to Consider

In this scenario, I would typically focus on the following aspects. Not everything needs to be addressed at the same time, and your team's priorities may differ.

- When resources are scarce and team morale may be under pressure, it is important to establish a common purpose and a strong team culture. Relevant aspects include**:** *Define Vision & Goals, Develop Design Team Culture.*
- Building strong relationships with other functions helps improve collaboration, alignment, and influence across the organization. Aspects to focus on include**:** *Build Stakeholder Alliances, Align with Business & Technology, Promote Design Capabilities.*
- When teams are stretched thin, improving workflow efficiency, making the most of available capacity, and reducing manual effort through selective automation can have an immediate impact. Aspects to look into**:** *Define Design Workflow, Manage Work Streams.*
- Strengthening customer focus and reducing product risk is often a key priority, for example, by establishing regular user research and contributing to selected innovation initiatives. Aspects include**:** *Advocate User Perspective, Drive Innovation.*
- To improve delivery quality and reduce inconsistencies, small teams often benefit from a basic set of design principles, guidelines, and a lightweight design system. These can also help non-designers make better decisions independently. Relevant aspects include**:** *Devel-*

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op Design Principles, Define Design Language, Ensure Coherence & Quality.

Leading Without Headcount

At one point in my career, I led a small UX team with very limited resources of its own. Stakeholder alignment and the involvement of other functions became necessary simply because my own team, which was essentially me plus some freelance capacity, could not do everything on its own.

I tried to drive change through collaboration. I gave marketing and customer service the input they needed to clean up or expand parts of the website themselves. I ran cross-functional workshops to collaborate on ideas and trained teams in design principles to improve quality. Rather than designing everything up front myself, I often reviewed work in progress directly with colleagues in other functions and helped improve it along the way.

Throughout, I tried to avoid getting involved in too many projects that required detailed design work or heavy documentation, so that I could spend my limited time on the most relevant issues. This approach served two purposes at once: it raised awareness of UX and design throughout the organization, while also strengthening collaboration across functions.

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Templates

- Assessment Process
- Self-Assessment Templates
- Workshop Voting Template
- From Assessment to Insights
- Design Organization SWOT Analysis
- Learning and Development Template
- Future Role Focus Template
- Field of Action Template
- Strategy Presentation Template
- Program Initiative Template

Online Resources

Additional resources are available online, including a collection of templates, the *DLF Guide* for onboarding your team, a list of recommended further reading, and related materials:

https://designleadershipframework.de/resources/



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The Design Leadership Framework

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designleadershipframework.de

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