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Leading Social Design: What does it take?



Christian Bason is the director of MindLab, an innovation unit that is part of the Danish central government. The author of four books on social innovation, design and leadership, most recently *Leading public sector innovation: Co-creating for a better society* (Policy Press, 2010), he is a member of the Advisory Board of the Lisbon Council and the European Design Leadership Board. Christian Bason holds an M.Sc. in political science and is currently writing a doctoral thesis on public management as a design discipline.

Across the globe, design is increasingly seen as a discipline that is central to social innovation. However, the fruitful use of design by public and social sector organisations requires leaders who are prepared to embrace new approaches such as ethnographic research, user involvement, ideation, prototyping and experimentation. **Christian Bason** explores how effective design practice can help realise social innovation.

In the London borough of Lewisham, Development Director Peter Gadsdon asked service designers to help redefine how his organisation deals with homelessness. In the city of Odense in Denmark, manager Christina

Pawsoe applied design-led methods such as graphic visualisation and cultural probing to radically transform her institution's services to mentally handicapped adults, recasting them as social innovators. In Adelaide in

South Australia, Carolyn Curtis, manager at the city's family services, radically redesigned social interventions for "chaotic" families, helping them thrive again.

In each case, in spite of vastly different national, cultural and organisational contexts, design helped these managers on a journey towards social innovation that might otherwise not have been possible.

What lessons do these case studies hold for other leaders in public and social organisations who have an appetite (or desperate need) for more fundamental, positive change?

What is Design Today?

Most of us would recognise that design can be about creating attractive, functional products such as smart phones, chairs and cars. Most would also recognise that design can be about shaping the graphical identity of products, services and organisations. However, by the late 1960s, social scientist Herbert Simon¹ had already proposed that design should be understood in much broader terms, as the human endeavour of "converting actual into preferred situations." In his work *The Science of the Artificial*, Simon, who later won the Nobel Prize in economics, argued that everyone designs when he devises a plan to create something that is better than what exists today.

Certainly, this should raise the interest of innovators who seek to generate better social outcomes. If design is about making things better not just for consumers but also for society, in what ways can design help social innovators? The answer lies in considering design from two perspectives: First, what is designed? Secondly, how is the designing done?

Building in part on Simon's argument, Richard Buchanan² of Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management, has proposed four areas of design:

- Design for symbolic, visual and graphic communication
- Design of material products
- Design of activities and organised services
- Design of complex systems or environments for living, working, playing and learning.

Buchanan emphasises that design really can focus on anything from crafting a new typeface for a publication, to designing policies for a region or a nation. Often, it is in the mix between the four areas that the power of design comes alive. When graphical identity, physical artefacts and contexts are coupled with new service interactions and systems, design becomes a powerful, holistic discipline that can generate tangible change.

For instance, when London's borough of Lewisham redesigned its approach to services, it changed the communication (from "homelessness services" to "housing options"), it created new visual guides to assist clients in

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their application process (using a highly tangible story-board style), it changed how case managers interacted with clients (considered a "profound effect" for changing the staff's view on the service they were providing) and, finally, it redesigned systems (including smoothening the municipal budgetary process for the transition from providing healthcare for children to healthcare for adults).

A Collaborative Way of Designing

As for the process of designing itself, increasingly, the notion of the individual, creative "artist-designer" is shifting towards a more collective process of designing solutions that are intertwined with those ultimately affected. This idea of "participatory design" is by no means new. It dates back to at least the early 1970s. But over the last decade or so, approaches that are explicitly oriented towards collaborative design of services and systems have become more mainstream under headings such as service design, design thinking, strategic design, human centred design, co-design and co-creation.

From Helsinki to Melbourne, Copenhagen to New York, London to New Delhi, these labels are increasingly being applied to the design of social solutions. The latter often draw on other disciplines such as ethnography and cultural research in order to ground the design work in how people experience and engage with existing or future communication, products, services and systems. The design process involves end-users in a number of different ways, from taking active part in the research phase (rather than as mere research subjects), to contributing to the development and testing of prototypes. The entire design process is often highly iterative, experimental and emergent.

The three cases above illustrate the point. In Lewisham, a design team trained individual case workers in how to

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use video for design research. The case workers then filmed their own interactions with clients seeking public housing, leveraging this material to generate new ideas of how to improve the service. In Odense, the adult mentally handicapped users were given digital cameras to document their aspirations for their workplace; subsequently they co-designed new offerings and services together with the managers and social workers. In Adelaide, designers, sociologists and a public manager practically lived with vulnerable families for months to conduct in-depth ethnographic research.

Using Design to Innovate

What is it that the process of design “does” for leaders who wish to drive more powerful social change? When design approaches are applied in practice, how do they create new ways to diagnose problems, interpret opportunities, and to take concrete action? Some of the key elements have to do with the design research process; some have to do with how new solutions are created; and some have to do with how managers fundamentally relate to their role as problem-solvers and innovators.

Carolyn Curtis, a public manager seconded to the families project run by the Australian Centre of Social Innovation in Adelaide,³ described how she experienced the design methods. “We were ourselves experiencing the actual interactions within and amongst the families, and breaking them down to examine in detail how they might look different. It is very concrete to capture the actual words they use... It has helped me experience how these citizens themselves experience their lives, and has allowed me to see the barriers. I have had to suspend my professional judgement.”

The notion of suspending judgement, or gaining a new perspective on problems, is one of the key contributions of design. In the mid-1980s, an organisational scientist, Gareth Morgan,⁴ made the point that managers “read” organisations. What he meant was that depending on the angle from which you view an organisation, various options for action become more or less obvious. Based on their “reading,” managers devise appropriate courses to address the challenges or opportunities they face. One of the key aspects of the design process is that it seems to allow managers, and often their staff too, to see problems in different ways, and thus to “read” their organisation differently. This “re-reading” in turn allows them to take different and more effective actions.

This is important because one of the main problems facing leaders who wish to address social problems is the sheer complexity of the social challenges they encounter, most of which have to do with individual and group behaviour, where problems are often multi-faceted and highly interdependent. But the way such problems are dealt with by many institutions is often deeply rooted in culture, mindsets, organisational inertia and tradition. How then does one even begin to think differently about more effective and sustainable ways of problem solving?

Design offers an incredibly simple but powerful way forward. It makes problems visible in ways that allow people to work on them. Capturing concrete human behaviour and action through photo, video, audio, sketching, diaries and other self-documentation is one set of tools. Another tool is visualising, for instance through diagrams or physical models: the “service journey” as experienced by users as they encounter a system.

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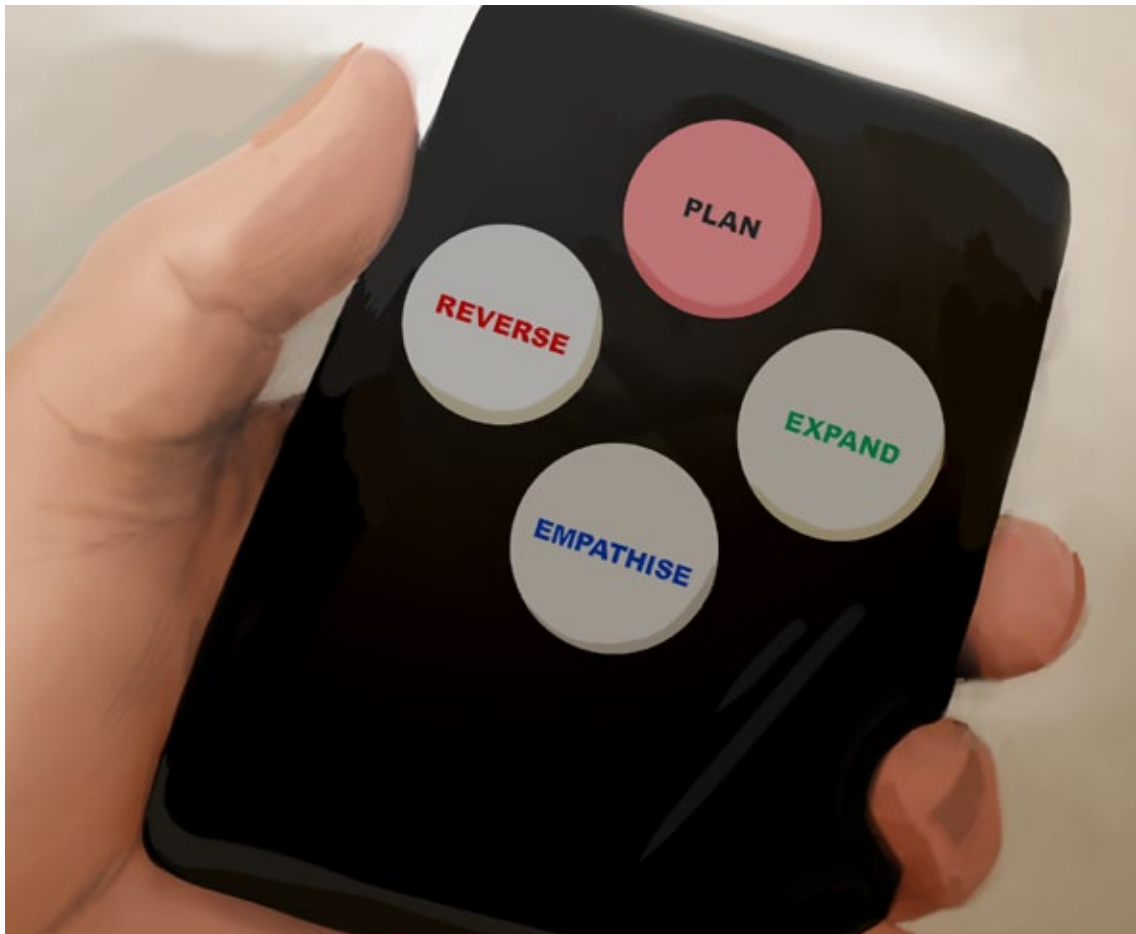
Consider the example of a family in chaos. One can capture what it feels like to be them, and to experience the problems and challenges of a dysfunctional family by simply living with them. Or one can capture it graphically by mapping the vast system of public and non-public organisations that leverage resources to try to help them. This is what I call “professional empathy”: The discipline of putting yourself in someone else’s situation, to explore how they experience what your organisation does to them. It is almost always an eye-opener, and it is usually the starting point of real change.

Focusing on Concrete Practice

Another way in which the new forms of design power innovation is by focusing on the efforts of social innovators—whether they are managers and staff in existing institutions or upcoming social entrepreneurs—to effect concrete change. By this I mean that the focus of design is ultimately to create something that is tangible. In public, bureaucratic organisations, managers have become so used to writing abstract memos, policies and strategies, that they risk having no good sense of what kind of concrete on-the-ground change they intend to create. Likewise, a passionate social entrepreneur may be good at writing smart-sounding business plans—but will they really work for the intended end-users?

Because designers insist on creating visuals—such as sketches, storyboards, mock-ups, personas, service journeys—they ultimately focus the innovation process on the actual change that should happen. In a different context, design helps anchor the dialogue around the new interactions and social outcomes to be achieved.

For instance, in Odense, at the institution for the mentally handicapped, manager Christina Pawsoe engaged the users in workshops where they would cut out magazines to create visual collages of the kinds of new and different activities they wanted. Many of the ideas developed in these workshops - such as a new shop to sell the crafts and goods they produced, or a programme to give some of the proceeds to cancer research—were quickly turned into practice. These initiatives massively increased the user satisfaction and quality of engagement with the service, and as they saw the concrete changes, their appetite for more increased. Today, Pawsoe hails the adult mentally handicapped users as the institution’s true innovators, and the professional staff have been recast as the assistants who help users implement the new ideas they have created themselves. To Pawsoe, applying design led to redefining what it means to be a social worker: “We are still professional, just in a different way.”





Some Challenges

What does it take to achieve a “license to design” social innovation, and what are the challenges in documenting the short- and long-term outcomes?

- **Getting the license to design**

Applying design approaches to tackle societal challenges is still novel, and there can be challenges in getting started. In the three cases I have discussed, the opportunity to engage with design came from different sources, but it was in one way or another offered in the context of a programme or initiative to use design to stimulate innovation.

In Denmark and the UK, there were support programmes for design in public services, run by the Ministry of Economic and Business Affairs and the UK Design Council;⁵ whilst in Australia, the city administration of Adelaide supports the use of design-led methods through the Australian Centre for Social Innovation.

Design was not part of the traditional management tools that the three leaders would otherwise have looked to. In each case, it took active curiosity and courage from the manager to grab this opportunity, and step up to a more “designer-ly” way of working. However, once they got started, there was no push-back from the senior management.

What is characteristic, however, is that the design process can be quite challenging to the staff. The adjective most used is that it’s “tough.” Redesigning services often means fundamentally changing how work is done, and this challenges not only long-standing practices and procedures, but also the very mindset from which such practices flow. This places the manager in a key role to stay the course, using the new perspectives, insights and “readings” that are gained to see change all the way through.

- **Documenting Impact**

A classic issue in social innovation is how to document sustainable change. The value of societal innovation should be measured in higher productivity, enhanced service experience for users, better outcomes, and strengthened democracy.⁶ Truly radical social innovations are those that simultaneously improve all these types of value. Behind this often lies a more fundamental re-definition of the relationship between a system’s efforts and the users. Consider how this plays out in the three cases I’ve highlighted throughout this article:

In Lewisham, the design process became the glue that bound a number of different transformation processes together in a reframing of “homelessness services” to “housing options.” This enabled staff to view their work very differently, and led to significant improvements in productivity, service experience for users, and smoother housing allocation.

In Odense, design-led methods recast mentally handicapped adults into social innovators who now take charge of ideating and selecting new initiatives for their institution. This has dramatically altered the respective roles of professionals and users. Productivity, as measured by the staff-to-user ratio, is up by a third while user satisfaction is at a point where the institution has a waiting list for the first time in its 40-year history.

In Adelaide, families were connected through a mentoring model that paired already existing resources in the community with families helping other families. The service now offers more of a platform for change than classic “delivery.” According to a rough estimate, the Family by Family programme helps 200 families thrive again at the same cost of placing one child in foster care.

The Way Ahead

We are witnessing an explosion of interest in the potential of design for social innovation. I believe that part of the reason is that the field of design—broadly defined—offers a range of comprehensive approaches and methods that are readily applicable to a variety of settings and contexts. Leaders who seek more systematic ways of managing social innovation can thereby tap into an entire profession that is intimately linked to the creative process. The challenge now is to place design practices more squarely at the centre of the social innovator's toolbox, rather than at the margin. Public managers and social innovators need to apply design approaches not because of the incentive of support programmes, but because of the promise of more radical, sustainable social change.



¹ Herbert Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial* (MIT Press, 1969).

² Richard Buchanan, "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking," essay based on paper presented at Colloque Reserches sur le Design: Incitations, Implications, Interactions, at l'Université de Technologie de Compiègne, Compiègne, France, 1990.

³ The Australian Centre for Social Innovation: Family by Family.

⁴ Gareth Morgan, *Images of Organization* (Sage, 1986).

⁵ UK Design Council: Public Services by Design.

⁶ A more elaborate argument can be found in Christian Bason, *Leading public sector innovation: Co-creating for a better society* (Policy Press, 2010).