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Play with Your Food/Tortilla Puzzle
by Lily McClure. See p. 33.



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By Dr. Robert Blaich, L/IDSA

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Robert Blaich attended Syracuse University and graduated with a BFA in industrial design. He was the vice president of corporate design and communications at the Herman Miller Furniture Company. In 1980, he became head of design at Royal Philips Electronics in the Netherlands. He was president of the Icsid from 1985 to 1987. In 1991, Blaich was knighted by Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. He remained at Philips until 1992 and subsequently founded Blaich Associates. In 1999, he became chairman of the board for TEAGUE.

DESIGN LEADERSHIP

Design leadership is a phrase I like very much. It is alive with the promise of creative-led action, promising a role that designers have enjoyed only fitfully during the last half century. But that is changing.

Design as a Core Competency

What is the status of design in a corporation? Should it be a core competency? When we talk about a company's core competencies and matching these strengths to market opportunities, we are generally referring to things such as rapid product development, high-quality manufacturing or prowess in marketing and services—but unfortunately not often enough design.

First, we need to be clear about just what we mean by design. My general definition is “a plan for making change.” This deceptively simple definition covers a wide range of activities that goes on in every company, either in a formal or informal way. The codification of these activities includes industrial design or product design, interaction design, communication design, graphic design, environment and facilities design, and more. These activities together comprise what is popularly called a company's image or brand. If the elements of a company's brand are managed in a way that complements one another so as to produce a coherent image in the minds of its various publics, then a company does indeed have a cohesive corporate identity program.

The brand image a company plans to create for whatever it makes and sells or whatever service it provides is part of a company's strategic planning. If the design activities are managed separately, then a company might not have a real corporate identity program or strategy. However, an image of the company will nevertheless be created by its products or services; the way the company communicates through advertising, public relations, literature, exhibitions and so forth will create an image by default rather than by strategic planning and management.

I feel very strongly that design should be a core competency of most companies. Differentiating one's products or services from the competitors' is the pivot point of

advantage. Differentiation—why customers would choose your products or services over another given a level playing field of price, performance and service—is the window of strategic opportunity. This is why it is appropriate, and in fact essential, to recognize design as a strategic factor for competitive advantage. If creatively, efficiently and assertively factored into the product or service process, design can be the key to achieving differentiation.

It is just as essential to understand that design has to contribute much more to the product creation process in order for it to achieve the strategic advantage of differentiation. Design as a styling activity—creating the form, colors and so on—is quite simply not enough. Unfortunately, this is still often the usual approach—a process that focuses on the periodic design of a single product. Design behaves as a core competency when a product design is undertaken with a multiyear approach within the context of the company's other products and is focused on strategically targeting marketing objectives and sales performance goals, as well as enhancing a company's overall image. Design has the potential to be more than a service, a technical response to marketing strategies. It can be a propelling force for a company's strategy. But in order for design to be a driving force, top management must see it as a core competency—a core competency that is a key to integrating activities between research, development, manufacturing and marketing.

Design as Integrator

The subject of design leadership is a dimension of management oriented more toward aspects of strategy creation, change and creative development. Visionary leadership is about enablement, rather than giving precise instructions. Leaders are risk takers who are willing to challenge the exist-



Peter Stackpole, The LIFE Picture Collection

ing order of things. Design, by its very nature, gives impetus to venturing into the previously unimagined. It encourages management to push borders, eschew the status quo, give form to vision and lead believers into new territories.

Management, on the other hand, is a set of processes that keeps complex systems running efficiently. Important aspects of management include planning, organizing, controlling and evaluating resources. The distinction between management and leadership is that design management is the implementation of design as a formal program of communicating the relevance of design to long-term corporate goals and coordinating design resources at all levels of corporate goals and activities to achieve the objectives of the corporation.

Are leadership and management discreet activities? They can be. I have observed people who are competent design managers but not especially effective design leaders. There are CEOs who provide leadership by supporting and promoting design as a corporate core competency but are not usually involved in design management. In observing the careers of many designers, it is also obvious that effective design managers can give strong leadership to the status of design in their companies. In fact, the combination of the two roles is essential.

One of the few certainties is that the profound changes we're experiencing require sensitive interaction between leadership and management with the role of design leader-

“In the statement of the problem
lies the solution.”

—Charles Eames

ship, in my opinion, laying the groundwork for managing the change. **The integrating role of design can be the crucial unifier between leadership and management.** In fact, integration could almost be a substitute definition for design.

Raising Design Awareness

Any company that wants to survive knows that it must achieve a competitive edge. Design as a strategy for competitiveness can deliver the quality advantage, the innovative edge that is essential for survival. There is also the matter of considering corporate responsibility with regard to social and environmental issues.

The use of design as a strategic element in industrial planning then requires five essential tasks:

1. Create a design infrastructure for developing a highly professional pool of talent.
2. Strengthen the concept of design leadership among the corporate activities.
3. Develop a broad-based environment for a design awareness that encompasses both businesspeople and the general public.
4. Assess honestly whether the product or service is useful for society or contributes to “sprawl” simply because it can be designed or produced.
5. Be conscious of the positive or negative environmental impact a product or service has.

It is a large task, but it is one that companies who are visionary about their future undertake. Raising the level of design awareness at the macro levels is well under way; we see it everywhere.

I believe that the most valid way for designers to contemplate the future is to gravitate to the process ingrained in us. That is, first define the problem; Murray Gellmann, my friend and Nobel Prize winner says, “Problem formation is more important than problem solution.” My friend and mentor Charles Eames often stated, “In the statement of the problem lies the solution.”

Where will the future take us? Physicist Stephen Hawking states, “Leadership is a daring step into the unknown.” As designers, we have the ability to invent the future in ways that are humane, visionary and wise. That's what design leadership is all about. ■



Designed in Austin, Texas

