QUARTERLY OF THE INDUSTRIAL DESIGNERS SOCIETY OF AMERICA **WINTER 2016**

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INNOVATION®

Creativity in Crisis. See page 32.

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Publisher
IDSA
555 Grove St., Suite 200
Herndon, VA 20170
P: 703.707.6000
F: 703.787.8501
www.idsa.org

Executive Editor
Mark Dziersk, FIDSA
Managing Director
LUNAR | Chicago
mark@lunar.com

Advisory Council
Gregg Davis, IDSA
Alistair Hamilton, IDSA

Sr. Creative Director
Karen Berube
IDSA
703.707.6000 x102
karenb@idsa.org

Contributing Editor
Jennifer Evans Yankopolus
jennifer@wordcollaborative.com
678.612.7463

Advertising
Katrina Kona
IDSA
703.707.6000 x100
katrinak@idsa.org

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idsa@idsa.org

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OFFENSIVE TERMS FOR

Why does it seem "manly" to refer to teamwork with lighthearted locker-room terms (that I'm sure everyone is familiar with, but we find too offensive to use in this publication—maybe you can decode the replacements)? Does calling collaboration "huddle coupling" make it sound like the *worst* thing to get stuck in? Using that kind of language makes us feel like everyone's getting screwed. Should anyone feel like that at work? People naturally want to feel like part of the group, but they also don't naturally want to collaborate—it's normal to have it *your way* or *no* way. Using that kind of non-PC language builds camaraderie *and* undermines collaborative spirit. Those people may not actually be trying to screw you, but they must have different definitions of collaboration. "Committee" is another derogatory term they use for collaboration (citing the camel as proof).

OK, so everyone doesn't view collaboration as the great process industrial designers see it as. After all, French *collaborators* were not on our side in World War II! As the global climate is heating up, the climate for cooperation is cooling down (Brexit and fracturing binary gender identities are examples) and the rhetoric of our new president doesn't bode well for collaboration. But the complex and contradictory issues humans face require group effort.

There are two approaches: the totalitarian system or the inclusive approach. The totalitarian way seems most effective. It works like this: One person tells everyone what to do. No wasted effort. Works great if that person is the smartest (like Plato's philosopher king)—but eventually a subordinate starts thinking that they're smarter, then there's a struggle and a rebalancing that is usually chaotic and violent. Meanwhile, the collaborative method is always chaotic! Working with a diversity of contributors makes it harder to hear the melody. It's messy, but incorporating all those different points of view gives a more accurate picture. Evidence can be more realistically evaluated—just as triangulation locates a point in space and more pixels mean higher resolution. The same with more compromises. Adding more samples gives higher fidelity; smoother resolution means

> “No true leader works in isolation, no true leader would not listen before showing the way.”
>
> *—AIAS Studio Culture Task Force Report*

TEAMWORK

each concession can be smaller. If triangulation is good for describing a point, meta-gulation is even better! That’s the genius of biology and evolution—survival of the fittest is based on the most high-fidelity view of the universe. The winning answer is tested again in the crucible of reality in an iterative process of life and death. Fail fast, fail often.

Back in 1944, Gordon Lippincott wrote: “A large number of mediocre ideas does not necessarily produce one good idea.” For us, collaboration is about nurturing creative teamwork, a method for producing better ideas. It’s a skill, like writing or playing in a band. Collaboration is not just a process of working out compromises—the process is about exploring, learning, creating, inspiration, trial and error and, yes, balancing contradictory solutions. The result is the best imaginable. It’s generative and synthetic. Diversity of choices leads to progress.

There is not a more collaborative profession than industrial design. Like jazz and improv comedy, collaboration is baked into our process. It’s not a separate element or step; it’s a critical ingredient of our entrepreneurial methodology. Collaboration with our audience is indispensable. We are translators. We can’t get anything done without working with manufacturers. Industrial designers work together to figure out how to use their machines and materials to make the designs faster, better and cheaper. User-centered design uses the same muscles. It’s essentially a team sport: Like in volleyball, designers have to play all the positions: server (creative), front line (user advocate), back line (ecological and social defenders), middle (manufacturer and marketing liaison). Not only do we have to work in teams, we *love* playing together! The process is pleasurable. Working with other designers is easy. For example, a few years ago after I spoke at a Dallas IDSA conference, they broke into groups to brainstorm ideas for the next conference—it was so smooth because everyone knew how to do it. In five minutes each group had a ton of cool ideas!

“Studio culture” is architect shorthand for their teamwork concept. It describes the mix of process, creative input, physical requirements, and management acquired during late nights, extreme dedication, personal sacrifice, and punishing marathon critiques that build a sense of community and form lasting friendships in the architects’ studio. As one educator responded in the *AIAS Studio Culture Task Force Report*: “No true leader works in isolation, no true leader would not listen before showing the way.” The Greeks made the word “architect” by combining the words for “chief” and “builder.” Architecture may be one of the oldest professions—buildings have been designed essentially the same way since humans moved out of caves. Architectural education is relatively more recent; it started in 1648 with the École des Beaux Arts, founded in Paris where studio culture developed.

Before there were hackathons, architects called them *charrettes*, French for the cart that carried their drawings. “On charrette” meant working up until the last minute, riding on the cart as it was pushed to the presentation. I have a picture of my grandfather working “on charrette” on a drafting board set up in the hallway outside the New York City Building Department, revising a drawing before the hearing. Silicon Valley’s version of charrettes are jams and hackathons. The intense communal attack on a problem starts with a problem and ends with a winner. “Hacker” used to be a pejorative term, akin to digital robbers; now it’s good to hack, and being disruptive is the way to go! Hacker entrepreneurial spirit drives incubators around the world.

The web was created for collaboration, which works even better now with teleconferences, Skype, GoToMeeting and Slack. For example Cisco Spark hypes sharing: “The innovative ‘team communication’ solution . . . that is just too useful to pass up. Cisco Spark gives you unlimited rooms in the cloud for all of your teams and projects. All your files and conversations in one place, accessible securely from all of your devices.” Like Basecamp: “Featuring a whole suite of collaborative tools including to-do lists, Wiki-style documents, file sharing and messaging, it packs just about everything you need to keep any project running smoothly.”

Surya Vanka, former director of user experience at Microsoft, is calling his immersion workshops Design

Swarms. The three-part event starts with a challenge, then everyone sketches solutions, and the next day they present what they came up with. Mike McCoy and his Highground Studio Masters created Image Space Object weekend workshops that leveraged all-night sleep deprivation to open creative doors and grease team conflicts.

The collaborative process has lots of names. At Druga 5 they call it—well, I can't say because it's another term too offensive for this publication, but it's like "band boom." The cool advertising agency tasks a handful of creative teams to develop pitches separately then battle for the job. "Creative combustion" is how Hartmut Esslinger described a special kind of creativity frogdesign was famous for. Just like a nuclear reaction that starts when too many atoms ignite a chain reaction, throwing a brief to the frogs makes them scramble like ping-pong balls in the science class demonstration. Obviously, certain levels of friction are conducive to innovation—if necessity is the mother of invention, then ego and *anger* are radioactive fuel. Frog's super-competitive environment energized the creative juices. It's no wonder that many design companies have names that express this idea: Ignition, Spark, Kaleidoscope, Octane, Fuel, Lava, Tool, Whipsaw and, of course, Ammunition.

The real weakness of the holistic approach is that it seems feeble when confronted by a specialized type-A expert or an aggressive, combative boss. Broad, all-fronts, T-shaped attacks seem too thin and allow a focused charge to break through. It's easy to poke holes in a general cosmological view because the web is thin and the "facts" are sharp. But it only *seems* weak. It works best when everyone is on the team. Progressive education is like user-centered design; the teacher doesn't tell the students what to do—in fact, students and the teacher are learning together. The best teacher is the one who appears to do nothing. It seems like some right-wing plot to peg people who seek compromise and consensus with the label soft and unrealistic. The capitalistic system doesn't reward it. Where I was raised, everyone was expected to collaborate—in fact, after getting blackballed in the 1950s all those commies found refuge in Yellow Springs, OH.

> "A large number of mediocre ideas does not necessarily produce one good idea."
>
> *Gordon Lippincott*

Faulty group dynamics result in parts of the team feeling authorized to use derogatory designations if their ideas aren't being recognized or advanced. But calling names won't help. The best collaborators are usually not celebrated as the hero of the story. The best collaborators are not trying to work their way up the ladder and get recognized. Collaboration is not necessarily the best tactic for getting ahead.

The type-A tactical advantage is that winning is the only goal—meaning that you lose. Leadership is making games with winners and losers. The advantage of collaboration is that it is based on the idea that everyone needs to win, which makes sense because real problems like poverty and climate change are not games with sides you can choose. For collaborators, play is open-ended. Collaborators are not trying to make their point or get recognized for their ideas. Good collaborators are team builders who help supercharge the whole project. Working up from the bottom is hard when you are trying to help everyone. Designers like Bill Moggridge and President Obama should be the model our society celebrates.

The point is we all need to live together. Just as hackers are the good guys now—we can flip those derogatory terms. Democracy, empathy and collaboration are the best way because we can accomplish more when we appreciate what more people want. Good things are happening if you look behind the headlines: Britain may be Brexiting, but 80 percent of Britons who take their vacations abroad go to Europe. It seems like refugees who will do anything to escape unrest in their homelands are headed for Detroit, where most of the Syrians coming to the US are settling. Racial friction seems out of control, but 40 percent of millennials are biracial. Gender-neutral bathrooms are opening doors for everyone. Transgenerational thinking is pushing user-centered design to future users. So industrial designers are just what we need—we can decode the *messages*. Our professional industrial design skills also make us good team players, enablers, communicators, catalysts for change and progress. We believe in the public. Design is a community project. It's a relay race for Beautility!

—Tucker Viemeister, FIDSA
www.tuckerviemeister.com

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