

Collaborative Creativity: A Design Approach to Systemic Challenges Navigating the Innovation Ecosystem

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Abstract

Unprecedented political, economic, health and environmental challenges in the world have made us react and reflect on things we have taken for granted. Companies and organizations became aware that proven approaches were no longer working, while the rapidly changing environments in which they operated required new momentum. Those driven by design were able to anticipate alternative approaches and used collaborative creativity and design thinking to shift their mindset and came up with creative solutions that kept their brands meaningful and relevant. This industry letter promotes the need for design to drive collaborative creativity among key stakeholders and its innovation ecosystem to the systemic level necessary to address these world challenges. It will further elaborate on the preconditions necessary for effective collaboration to become responsible partners that drive sustainable growth, balanced with care for humanity and the planet. The impact and value of design is determined by its design leadership and depends on how it is connected, aligned and integrated, first within the design function itself, second across the other business functions and third beyond the boundaries of the company in partnerships with other stakeholders. Understanding and aligning the key drivers and success factors of different stakeholder groups will be a prerequisite for making collaborative creativity work effectively and navigating the innovation ecosystem driving long-term societal progress.

Keywords: Collaborative Creativity, Design Leadership, Strategic Design, Stakeholders, Innovation Ecosystem.

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1 Introduction

As the world changes dramatically, market mechanisms based on the economic value exchange of goods and services between makers and buyers may no longer be sustainable. The United Nations has defined seventeen ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that world leaders have agreed to achieve by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). These goals include themes such as affordable healthcare, livable cities, efficient mobility, and renewable energy. The aim was to create a set of global goals, related to the environmental, political and economic challenges that we face as humanity. All goals have two things in common: they are all systemic challenges of extremely high complexity and they all aim to build lives and dignity for all people, address the inequality gap, and strive for an equal distribution of wealth. As a result, all stakeholder groups in the innovation ecosystem, such as governments, policy makers, local authorities, NGO's, investors,

companies, customers, academia and communities will need to take ownership working closely to align interests, setting priorities and create enabling conditions to achieve the defined goals and drive progress together.

The way success is measured among each of these key stakeholder groups varies and performance indicators are often not aligned or even contradictory. The World Economic Forum's Future of Growth Report 2024 proposes a new scorecard to assess growth and align it with broader goals around inclusiveness and sustainability (World Economic Forum, 2024). Also in the profession of design it is recognized that its value needs a broader perspective and the Design Economic Research by the Design Council UK emphasized through their *Design Value Framework* (Design Council UK, 2022) the significance of social, cultural, environmental, and democratic impact of design that is often overlooked.

"More than ever before, fearless design leadership is crucial to redesign this world and make it a sustainable place where all people can live together in harmony, safely, healthy and happily," (Hong Kong Design Centre, DMatters, 2020).

2 Collaborative creativity

The impact that large global companies have on the innovation ecosystem is often underutilized, especially when focused on short-term economic outcomes. Their brands, networks, manufacturing capabilities, knowledge and access to capital investments are powerful levers for breakthrough transformations and new ventures.

During my career as an executive design leader, I have witnessed that the best innovations come from 'team sport' where all business players (functional disciplines) work together passionately. As such, collaborative creativity has emerged as a design approach to address that great things happen in collaboration where individual contributors are part of a larger innovation ecosystem.

The best work comes from collaborative creativity across disciplines, and the next big idea will naturally emerge from a creative collision of many smaller ideas building on each other. As shared during my inaugural address at the 40th anniversary of the Design Management Institute: "The greatest catalyst for building people value and driving growth is recognizing that we are participating in a connected world, a world that requires an approach that is both interactive as well as integrated. This principle of collaborative creativity reminds us that we are all part of an innovation ecosystem, uniting purpose and partnership." (DMI Leadership Conference, 2015).

Designers do not necessarily own creativity as it must flow through all business functions continually producing innovative ideas. As such, collaborative creativity is a mindset and not a process. This mindset utilizes Design Thinking which is centered around empathy for people to fuel the inspiration to build solutions based on a collaborative approach and co-creation. In the context of driving systemic innovation, a diversity of stakeholders and thoughts should be embraced, while complexity and potential conflict of interest may increase as a result. It is critical for companies to unleash their collaborative creativity within their own organizations (intra-organizational) before building on this mindset with external parties to co-create systemic innovation opportunities (inter-organizational). An endorsed long-term vision and strategic direction are fundamental to successfully managing these organizational collaborations. These should not be managed as opportunistic incidental business partnerships, but should be addressed structurally with the intention of achieving long-term social impact at large scale.

3 Innovation ecosystem

Collaborative creativity and design thinking can be great catalysts across the participants of the innovation ecosystem although the effectiveness depends on how it is connected, aligned and integrated (Figure 1):

1. within the design function itself,
2. among the other business functions, and
3. across the boundaries of a company with other stakeholders.

The *connection* with design is based on the level of understanding of and commitment to design, while the *alignment* is based on shared goals reflected in the strategies and objectives to achieve a level of *integration* with design that drives innovation excellence and collectively stimulates transformation.

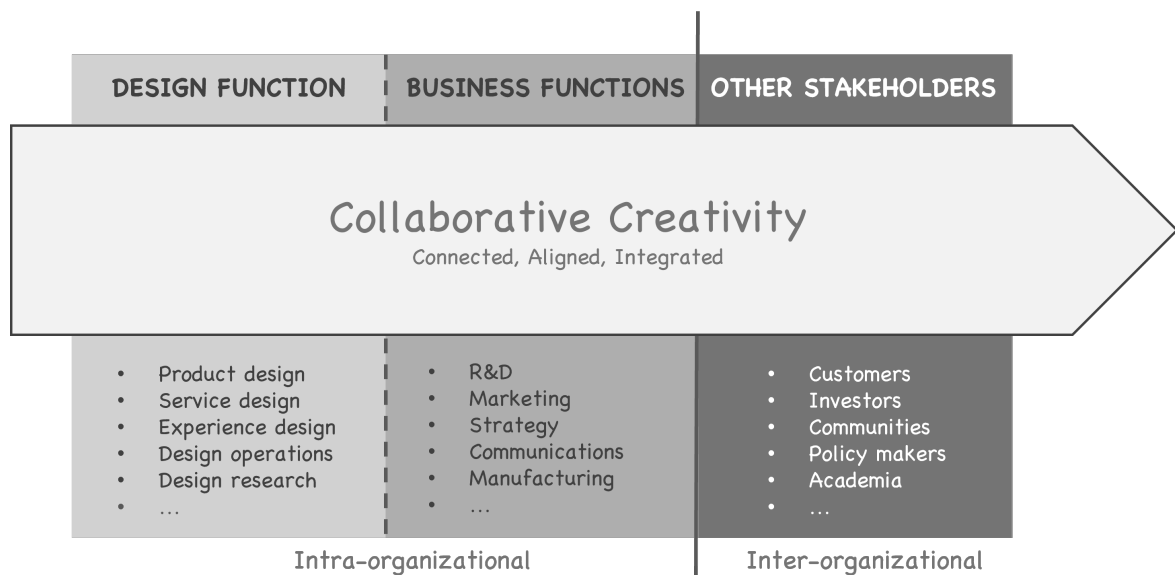


Figure 1. Collaborative creativity of design across the participants of the innovation ecosystem

3.1 Collaborative creativity within the design function

The increasing complexities of societal challenges, the growing number of new technology platforms (e.g., virtual, digital, AI), and the need for more systemic innovation approaches required for highly specialized design competencies, resulting in a dramatically growing number of it. In a mature design function there may be more than fifteen design competencies such as: Product Design, Graphic Design, Design Research, Web Design, Service Design, Fashion Design, Material Design, Advanced Design, Interior Design, Brand Design, Packaging Design, Design Operations, User Interface Design, Interaction Design, Experience Design,...

This growing amount of design competencies requires alignment within the design function, allowing the other business functions to understand, engage and collaborate effectively with design. Driven by their specific areas of design expertise and their passion, each of these design competencies will happily place themselves at "the center of the world," often leaving other business functions confused and distracted by it. Overwhelmed by such level of detail of design competencies, it is difficult to understand who should be effectively involved. Design leadership has the responsibility to create clarity to ensure excellence in design and maximize the value and

impact of its design function. Like all functions in a business organization, design must define and share its governance, taxonomy and creative culture.

A strong design vision and mission form the bases for long-term strategies and objectives, supporting the overall business objectives. Alignment within the function of design will be a prerequisite for effective collaboration across the organization applying collaborative creativity and design thinking with all business functions involved to drive innovation on an intra-organizational level.

3.2 Collaborative creativity of design among business functions

The business functions interacting primarily with design are Research & Development, Marketing, and Strategy, supporting the individual business line activities and the company as a whole. Design must align their approach through their processes, methods and tools with the other core company processes in order to be effective.

As reflected in the “Design Ladder” framework (Danish Design Centre, 2003), design will maximize its value and impact as it develops its maturity and integration, depending on the level of understanding of design as aesthetics, as a process, or as a strategy. The impact of design will actually increase when utilizing “Design as strategy” instead of “Design as tactics” which typically focuses on operational and short-term results. Engaging in “Design as strategy” will focus on value creation through front-end collaboration creating ecosystem solutions and aligned offerings based on research insights. This design position will be more integral and therefore more impactful, with collaborative creativity and design thinking being the driving force to create meaningful and relevant innovations.

This approach will lead to successful cross-functional collaboration and effective innovation teamwork. It will be a prerequisite for supporting the more complex and dynamic partnership relations with other stakeholder groups involved, which will be often driven by influence and purpose.

3.3 Collaborative creativity of design across the company boundaries

Throughout my career, I have had the opportunity to work as a design professional and leader across various inter-organizational structures such as: acquired companies, corporate partnerships, brand licensing partners, open innovation research conglomerates, and consultancy partnerships. These where great learning opportunities to advance design capabilities and navigate the complexities across disciplines, organizations and cultures. It was crucial to fully align all business functions and its vision and strategies first to effectively participate in these different partnerships. Collaborative creativity and design thinking have proven to be effective approaches to facilitating and often co-creating this alignment, which drives successful and long-lasting partnership relations over time.

Table 1 summarizes the key organizational attributes across the boundaries of the design function, business functions and other stakeholders that drive connection, alignment and integration between partners in the innovation ecosystem. It highlights the need for alignment, within the *design function*, to effectively enable innovation teamwork, across all *business functions* and more widely in partnership collaborations between different *stakeholders* beyond the boundaries of a company. Within this overly complex innovation ecosystem it is required to effectively navigate the dynamics that comes with it to achieve systemic transformation.

Table 1. Key organizational attributes driving connection, alignment, and integration across innovation ecosystem

DESIGN FUNCTION	BUSINESS FUNCTIONS	OTHER STAKEHOLDERS
Design direction	Shared vision/mission	Shared purpose
Governance	Investment priorities	Long-term strategy
Taxonomy	Cross-functional objectives	Mutual interests
Process, methods, tools	Core company processes	Accountabilities
Creative culture	Company culture	Cultural differences
Excellence	Incentive alignment	Relation ownership

4 Design leadership roles

The role of a design leader is to put design at the heart of the company, which goes beyond just the building of a team of designers. It means that the design leader must shape the design organization while creating a thriving environment in which the function of design will be integrated organizationally, operationally and culturally to drive progress advancing innovation and enhancing meaningful customer experiences. The often complex and conflicting objectives and activities that design leaders face can be distracting and make them less effective (Quint et al., 2022).

To strategically scale and elevate design, the design leader is responsible for creating the conditions for its functional organization. As summarized in Table 1. the design function must have its key organizational attributes in place, such as design direction, governance, taxonomy, creative culture and processes, to become a mature and strategic design partner within their company organization. Only then is successful and effective cross-functional collaboration guaranteed, while this is a prerequisite for successfully entering into partnerships beyond the boundaries of its own company organization.

Design leaders, with their articulated vision often enter into dialogue with potential partners through inspiration and a passionate drive for transformation. In my experience, such relationships often start from design leader to design leader within organizations, because they share the same creative language and imagination about a possible future. Their creative and collaborative mindset can be a great catalyst in establishing such partnerships and introducing their companies to new areas with unexpected opportunities for innovation.

5 Conclusion

Partnerships are a great mechanism to drive systemic innovation opportunities needed to solve world's major challenges, as outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. However this requires participation of all appropriate key stakeholders in the ecosystem to work closely on a shared long-term agenda addressing these world challenges together. Collaborative creativity and design thinking can be applied as a mindset to stimulate ideation and problem solving across functions (disciplines), organizations and key stakeholders.

For design to effectively support their companies and engage in these partnerships, it must first connect, align and integrate within its design function itself. For companies to effectively partner, their cross-functional collaboration and excellence in innovation teamwork are essential. The overly complex and dynamic conditions among stakeholder partnerships will only become

effective when purpose-driven supported by shared long-term strategies and strong organizational ownership.

Design leaders often create new opportunities for innovation and partnerships through their articulated vision and imagination about the future. The different organizational characteristics of partners can make relationships challenging, complex, with often conflicting key objectives.

Organizational academic research could inform these collaborations to become more effective and long-lasting to successfully driving systemic innovation. Most research focuses on for-profit organizations, while all type of organizations are essential for the innovation ecosystem to move forward. “Designers, with their creativity, imagination and their people focused and collaborative mindset, can be the protagonists and catalyst to connect all stakeholders to lead the way” (Hong Kong Design Centre, DMatters, 2020).

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Biographies



Eric Quint. Eric Quint is a renowned design industry leader and pioneer as one of the world's first Chief Design Officers appointed by a Fortune 100 company. He is a former Senior Vice President, Chief Brand and Design Officer at 3M Company, and former Vice President, Head of Design Management and Consulting at Royal Philips. He brings more than 20 years of international experience in executive design leadership and practices design thinking as a mindset for collaboration and transformation at multiple levels of an organization to drive progress. Eric is co-author of the Good Design awarded book for Stanford University Press titled "Design Leadership Ignited" which describes how to embrace the complexities of design leadership to elevate design at scale. His achievements have been referenced and featured in numerous international books and publications, and the design teams under his vision and leadership have been recognized with over 150 international design awards. As a design leadership advisor, keynote speaker and guest lecturer Eric is mentoring and inspiring the next generation of design leaders.

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