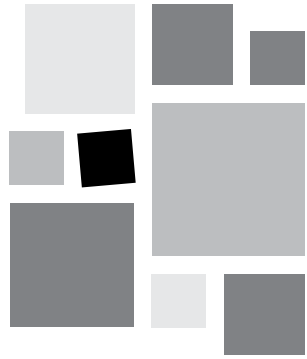


Designing Together

The collaboration and
conflict management handbook
for creative professionals

Dan M. Brown

Foreword by Scott Berkun



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conflict management handbook
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**New
Riders** | VOICES THAT MATTER™

DESIGNING TOGETHER:
THE COLLABORATION AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT HANDBOOK FOR CREATIVE PROFESSIONALS
Dan M. Brown

New Riders
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Dedication

For Mom

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Acknowledgments

I've wanted to write this book for a long time, and I'm grateful to the team at New Riders for helping me make it a reality. Nancy Davis and Michael Nolan were instrumental in helping me shape and articulate the vision, and I'm grateful for their vigilant leadership and shrewd understanding of what makes a great book.

Jennifer Lynn helped hone my voice and guided me out of some turbulent waters, some of my own making. I'm grateful for her even temper and occasional reminders about karma.

Liz Danzico's request that I expand my conflict management workshop to include collaboration skills was the catalyst that gave life to *Designing Together*. I'm grateful to her for working with me to develop that workshop, and for her ongoing trust in me to educate the next generation of designers.

Nathan Curtis is literally the best business partner a guy could have. He gave me the room I needed to scratch this itch. Nathan is the first person to tell you that he isn't a "people person," but he sells himself short. The truth is that much of the thinking in this book came from watching Nathan lead teams and from working with him to build a culture of collaboration at EightShapes. Nathan, now it's your turn.

The team at EightShapes was incredibly supportive as I "went dark" for long stretches to write the book. Jody Thomas, our director of visual design, provided some useful advice on the cover design. Veronica Erb and James Melzer provided some feedback on the format of the reference section of this book. Chuck Borowicz, Matt Dingee, Mary Specht, and Jason Wishard served as an occasional informal focus group as I bounced some ideas off them. I'm grateful to them for their candid feedback and for not asking, "So, is this billable?"

Some content started in the form of a card game, *Surviving Design Projects*. I presented this game for the first time at the IA Summit 2012 in New Orleans. Workshop participants were enthusiastic and generous with their feedback. Since then, I've run the workshop several times, and gotten feedback from a dozen people who played the game with their teams. Thank you to everyone who purchased the game and took the time to give me their thoughts. Thanks especially to EightShapers Veronica, James, Jason, and PJ, who play-tested the game.

The concept of mindset is based on the work of Carol Dweck. Her work over the last several decades to understand why smart people are afraid of failure has been instrumental to me as a mentor, as a manager, as a partner, as a parent, and as a designer. I've summarized her work in Chapter 2, extending it based on my experience. Any errors are mine alone.

Sometimes I think I write books so I have an excuse to talk to awesome people. In seeking contributors for *Designing Together*, I wanted to assemble a diverse group who could all speak to common themes of collaboration and team dynamics while offering different perspectives. Their thoughts far exceeded my expectations. Thanks to David Belman, Mandy Brown, Erika Hall, Denise Jacobs, Jonathan “Yoni” Knoll, Marc Rettig, and Jeanine Warisse Turner, PhD, for lending their voices.

I now get to cross “Scott Berkun writes Foreword for book” off my bucket list. I've long been a fan of Scott's writing and thinking, and I'm grateful he could lend a bit of both to this book. When I shared the manuscript with him, his enthusiasm for the content gave me the boost I needed to reach the bitter end of the project. Thanks, Scott, for your words and your encouragement.

My kids, Harry and Everett, were incredibly patient as I stepped away for a few hours each weekend to do some writing. It was really only in the last few weeks that Harry started to ask, “Daddy, when will you be done?” Boys, I'm looking forward to having some free time back so we can collaborate on our own projects.

Finally, my deepest gratitude and thanks go to Sarah, my constant companion and cherished partner in life, love, and child rearing. She took on more than her share of all three while I holed up to write in the evenings and on weekends. Thank you so much, sweetheart, for being a wonderful mother, a loving wife, and my best friend. Ours is the best project I've ever collaborated on.

Foreword

The cliché of Forewords for books is they have a seemingly famous person express how wonderful the book you're about to read is. But the secret we authors don't want you to know is often the Foreword is written by a friend who either lost a bar bet or is trading for the destruction of unsavory photos in the author's possession. This explains why most Forewords are dreadfully dull and unworthy of the book they're in. I can promise you I've only met Dan once and owe him nothing.

I'm writing this Foreword simply because this book is exceptional. It captures the central flaw in the talents of most designers: how to create with other people. And it achieves this without falling victim to the clichés and platitudes that render most books of this kind useless.

Back when I was a student, my vision was a lifetime of making world-changing designs. But in these dreams I always had a starring role, with minions scurrying about, taking every order and doing all the work I didn't (or couldn't) do. How naive the dreams of young designers are. No great thing in the history of design and engineering was, or ever will be, made this way. It always takes a team of craftsmen, working in harmony, to make something great. Working with others has always been ignored in design culture. And the result is that the student fantasy lives on far too long in the careers of creatives, squandering their talent and their happiness, too.

If you pick any great design from today, or in history, and dig into the details of how it was made, you'll find a team of talented people working well together. Each contributing and building on each other's work. They didn't always like each other, but they learned how to put the quality of the results ahead of petty differences. Their ability to do this isn't magic. Nor is it based on their creative talents. Instead it's a set of simple attitudes and skills this book clearly explains. While I've learned many of these practices along my career, I'd never seen them as clearly named, explained, and taught as they are here.

If you want to escape work that buries you in stress, disrespect from coworkers, or meetings that resemble Custer's Last Stand, you'll find solutions in the following pages. I'm jealous of the moments of clarity awaiting you in the chapters ahead.

—Scott Berkun

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Contents at a Glance

INTRODUCTION

Conflict, Collaboration, and Creativity xix

CHAPTER 1

Designer as Contributor 1

CHAPTER 2

The Designer Mindset 19

CHAPTER 3

Listening: The Essential Skill 33

CHAPTER 4

The Role of Conflict in Design 51

CHAPTER 5

Assessing Conflict: What's Really Wrong 71

CHAPTER 6

The Model of Conflict: Patterns, Situations, and Traits 95

CHAPTER 7

How Collaboration Works 111

CHAPTER 8

The Four Virtues of Collaboration 131

CHAPTER 9

Situations: Circumstances and Scenarios Common to Design Projects 151

CHAPTER 10

Traits: Evaluating Yourself and Your Colleagues 185

CHAPTER 11

Conflict Patterns: Behaviors for Reaching Resolutions 207

CHAPTER 12

Collaboration Behaviors: Embodying the Virtues 227

Contents

Dedication iii
Acknowledgments v
Foreword vii

INTRODUCTION

Conflict, Collaboration, and Creativity xix

What's in This Book xxi
This Book Builds Stronger Teams xxii
 This Book *Will* Change Minds and Behaviors xxiii
 The Desired Goal: Great Design Teams xxiii
 This Book Is for Teams of All Shapes and Sizes xxv
 How This Book *Will* Help Designers xxvi
 How This Book *Will* Help Team Leaders xxvi
 What This Book Is Not xxvii
Design Depends on Conflict and Collaboration xxviii
Five Central Ideas xxix
 Behavior xxix
 Mindset xxix
 Self-Reflection xxx
 Empathy xxx
 Design Success xxx
Surviving Design Projects, The Game xxxi
Thank You xxxi

CHAPTER 1**Designer as Contributor 1**

Elements of a Design Team	3
Roles and Responsibilities	4
Goals and Priorities	6
Techniques and Methods	7
Project Parameters	8
The Glue of a Design Team	9
Basic Values	9
Beyond the Basics	10
The Contributing Designer	11
Self-Awareness	14
Playing Well with Others	14
Getting to No	15
Evaluating Designers as Contributors	16
Typical Evaluation Methods	16
Why Mindset	17
TL;DR	18

CHAPTER 2**The Designer Mindset 19**

Mindset Defined	21
Attitude, Disposition, and Perception	21
Dweck's Mindset Model	22
The Best Mindset for Designers	24
Adaptive (Not Rigid)	25
Collective (Not Solitary)	26
Assertive (Not Passive)	28
Changing One's Mindset	30
TL;DR	32

CHAPTER 3

Listening: The Essential Skill 33

The Good Listener's Checklist	35
Prepare	36
Pause	39
Probe	40
Paraphrase	42
When to Break the Rules	43
Obstacles to Listening	46
Short Circuits	46
Closed Doors	47
Embattled Egos	48
TL;DR	50

CHAPTER 4

The Role of Conflict in Design 51

The Value of Conflict	53
Design Decisions and Shared Understanding	55
What Happens Without a Shared Understanding	57
Obstacles to a Shared Understanding	60
Healthy vs. Unhealthy Conflict	61
Distinguishing Between Healthy and Unhealthy Conflict	62
Unhealthy Conflict as a Mask	63
Converting Unhealthy Conflict to Healthy Conflict	64
The Nature of Resolution	65
Persuasion: One Adopts the Other	66
Iteration: They Reach a Compromise	66
Perspective Shift: One Looks at It Differently	66
Deferred Decision: They Decide to Hold Off	67
Common Ground: They Agree on Something	67
Evaluating Resolutions	68
TL;DR	70

CHAPTER 5**Assessing Conflict: What's Really Wrong 71**

What Causes Conflict?	72
Internal Sources of Conflict	76
Method Conflict	76
Outcome Conflict	80
External Sources of Conflict	83
Disconnectedness	86
Exclusion	87
Misdirection	88
Ambiguity	89
Examples of Conflict	90
Scenario 1: Confronting Insufficient Progress	91
Scenario 2: Clarifying Design Principles	92
TL;DR	93

CHAPTER 6**The Model of Conflict: Patterns, Situations, and Traits 95**

The Model of Conflict	97
Situations	98
Internal Sources of Conflict	98
External Sources of Conflict	98
Patterns	99
Empathize	100
Involve	100
Redirect	101
Reframe	101
Traits	101
Self-Awareness	102
Four Characteristics	102
Assessing Your Traits	105
Mutual Impact	106
Situations < > Patterns	107
Patterns < > Traits	107
Traits < > Situations	108

The Model in Action 108

TL;DR 109

CHAPTER 7

How Collaboration Works 111

A Definition of Collaboration 112

More Than Working Together 112

 Collaboration vs. Groupthink 115

Misconceptions about Collaboration 117

 Oversimplification 117

 Ineffective and Inefficient 118

 Wrong Focus 118

 When Collaboration Isn't Working 119

The Aspects of Collaboration 119

 Tools 122

 Mindset 126

 Culture 128

TL;DR 130

CHAPTER 8

The Four Virtues of Collaboration 131

The Virtues 132

 Clarity and Definition 133

 Accountability and Ownership 134

 Awareness and Respect 137

 Openness and Honesty 139

Embodying Collaboration 144

 Choosing the Right Tools 144

 Adjusting Your Mindset 145

 Evaluating Corporate Culture 146

TL;DR 149

CHAPTER 9**Situations: Circumstances and Scenarios Common to Design Projects 151**

How to Use Situations	152
About the Situations	152
The Situations	153
Design ignorance	154
Distracted by internal competition	155
Distracted by shiny objects	156
Don't know what we need	157
Efforts ignored	158
Excluded from planning	159
False consensus	160
Inconsistent expectations	161
Insufficient progress	162
Irrelevant comparisons	163
Lack of clear inputs	164
Lack of context	165
Lack of decision maker	166
Lack of stable strategy	167
Late-breaking requirements	168
Misinterpretation of tone	169
New perspectives	170
No plan	171
No time to design	172
Not a team player	173
Overpreparation	174
Poorly composed feedback	175
Poorly planned presentation or discussion	176
Reluctant participation in design activities	177
Responses not timely	178
Separated from key stakeholders	179
Tasks and goals not aligned	180
Uncoordinated collaboration	181
Unfounded design direction	182
Unreasonable constraints	183
Wrong scope	184

CHAPTER 10

Traits: Evaluating Yourself and Your Colleagues 185

The Traits	186
Why Not Myers-Briggs?	187
How to Use These Traits	188
Adaptability	189
Adherence to style	190
Assumption threshold	191
Creative triggers	192
Defining the challenge	193
Desired cadence	194
Dogmatism	195
Format for feedback	196
Giving and getting recognition	197
Knee-jerk reaction	198
Level of abstraction	199
Perception of control	200
Preferred environment	201
Preferred perspective	202
Project load	203
Structure of design reviews	204
Transparency	205

CHAPTER 11

Conflict Patterns: Behaviors for Reaching Resolutions 207

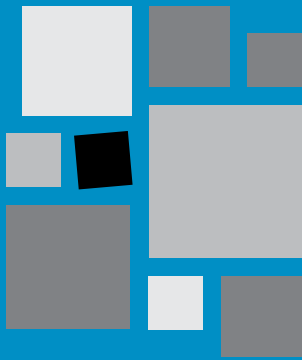
How to Use the Patterns	209
The Patterns	210
Acknowledge achievements	211
Anticipate agendas	211
Ask for a story	211
Ask for help	212
Ask for the first step	212
Ask questions	212
Assert your process	213
Blame a “bad cop”	213
Call their bluff	213
Capture lessons learned	214

Change the channel	214
Change the metaphor	214
Channel your colleagues' best qualities	215
Come back later	215
Communicate implications	215
Consider micro/macro perspectives	216
Consider your work/their work	216
Convert failure to action	216
Draw pictures	217
Enumerate issues	217
Frame the conversation	217
Go back to basics	218
Help me help you (The Jerry Maguire)	218
Help me make this better	218
Help me prioritize	219
Hold a workshop	219
List assumptions	219
Make a plan (logistics specifics)	220
Make assumptions	220
Make it real	220
Offer alternatives	221
Offer a sneak peek	221
Pick one thing	221
Pick your battles	222
Prioritize the portfolio	222
Provide starting points	222
Recount previous conversation	223
Reduce the assignment	223
Reflect the position	223
Seek small victories	224
Set reasonable expectations	224
Show the goal	224
Show your work	225
Take baby steps	225
Take responsibility	225
Treat it like a project	226

CHAPTER 12

Collaboration Behaviors: Embodying the Virtues 227

How to Use These Behaviors	228
The Behaviors	230
Ask questions that yield specific answers	231
Centralize decision making	231
Clarify expectations regarding ability and delivery	232
Communicate progress	232
Don't hog opportunities	232
Embrace constructive criticism	233
Embrace risk	233
Employ tools that yield meaningful outcomes	233
Encourage disruptive communications	234
Engage in dialogue	234
Engage multiple senses to communicate	235
Establish role definitions	235
Give others room to learn from mistakes	236
Have a communications plan	236
Have a project plan	236
Have decision-making mechanisms	237
Have objectives for every discussion	237
Keep meetings focused and short	237
Know when you're "spinning"	238
Offer direct critiques	238
Play to strengths	239
Provide a rationale for decisions	239
Recognize contributions	240
Reduce competition	240
Reflect on your performance	241
Respect the calendar	241
Set availability expectations	242
Set performance expectations	242
Author Bio	243
Contributor Bios	244
Bibliography	247
Index	249



INTRODUCTION

Conflict, Collaboration, and Creativity

THE ASSIGNMENT SEEMED INSANE: Develop a new design for a Web site for a major consumer brand. By design, I mean an overall direction as embodied in a few key Web pages—the home page and some interior pages. Besides establishing a design direction, the project called for showing how the direction would be responsive—adaptable to a wide array of screen sizes, for Web browsers appearing on smartphones and tablets as well as laptops and big monitors.

The total timeline for the project was about a month, maybe six weeks. In that time, our team was responsible for devising the design direction and preparing a prototype to communicate how it would work in different browser sizes.

The odds were stacked against us, even more than already described. The client had insisted on a project framework that we didn't agree with. Though such a constraint would normally preclude us from taking the project, we chose to pursue it anyway. What we'd learn from the project would be worth the risk of failure.

Typically, plans for many of our projects include a week or two of intense prototyping. The team comes together and holes up in a room for four to five days to churn out the first draft of the prototype. During this week, the team establishes the underlying code framework, captures the behavior of key screens, begins to demonstrate the responsive behaviors, and embodies the broad strokes of visual styling. It's a massive collaborative effort that involves lots of moving parts, team members from various disciplines, and a lot of sketching on whiteboards and side-by-side programming.

As a part of this experience, I had to occasionally take a moment to step back and see the team through different eyes. It was like the advice I got before my wedding: you're going to be so caught up in the event, you should force yourself to pause and take it in. During those moments of pause, watching the team work, I could see the practice of Web design (maybe all design) changing. This spirit of collaboration, of finding satisfaction and efficacy in the well-oiled machine, became evident elsewhere. It showed up in the professional development objectives of my colleagues. It came up in conversations with candidates. It resonated with other clients and other projects.

We pulled it off, this by-all-accounts-insane design direction project. It was collaboration that brought us to the finish without killing each other and conflict that fueled the creativity.

What's in This Book

Designing Together is a book about collaboration and conflict, two equal but different forces that exert pressure on design teams. It is divided into three parts.

The first part, which focuses on the **fundamentals**, explains the role of the designer as a contributor on teams, and answers the basic question, “Why are conflict and collaboration important for creativity?”

1. “Designer as Contributor” describes the role and position of the designer who is part of a team.
2. “The Designer Mindset” draws on the work of Carol Dweck to explain how designers must have the right attitude.
3. “Listening: The Essential Skill” establishes some guidelines for the most basic skill to drive collaboration and put conflict to good use.

The next part, which focuses on the **theory**, establishes theoretical frameworks and language to help designers think about and talk about conflict and collaboration.

4. “The Role of Conflict in Design” explains how conflict is essential for the design process.
5. “Assessing Conflict: What’s Really Wrong” provides advice on how to evaluate the difficult situations that arise in creative projects.
6. “The Model of Conflict: Patterns, Situations, and Traits” establishes a framework for showing how situations relate to designers’ personality traits and patterns of behavior.
7. “How Collaboration Works” describes the dynamics of collaboration on creative teams and dismantles some myths about collaboration.
8. “The Four Virtues of Collaboration” establishes four guiding principles for collaborative environments.

The final part, which serves as a **reference**, summarizes practical tools for assessing designers and complicated situations, as well as tactical behaviors for dealing with conflict and cultivating collaboration.

9. “Situations: Circumstances and Scenarios Common to Design Projects” describes recurring difficult conversations or events.

10. “Traits: Evaluating Yourself and Your Colleagues” explores the aspects of a designer’s working style or personality that affect how he or she interacts with the team.
11. “Conflict Patterns: Behaviors for Reaching Solutions” provides suggestions for behaviors to help unstick sticky situations.
12. “Collaboration Behaviors: Embodying the Virtues” examines habits that lead to more effective collaboration.

This Book Builds Stronger Teams

Designing Together is a book about team dynamics. It’s about achieving the right chemistry so that design teams can do great things together. It considers

- **Situations:** The obstacles that people run into on design projects
- **Behaviors:** What people do on design projects to deal with situations
- **Mindsets:** How participants consider and approach situations
- **Virtues:** The principles that drive great creative teams

Where to Go First?

- If you’re just entering the field, start with Chapters 1 and 2, which frame the role of the designer in the modern creative team.
- If you’re working on a project that seems in trouble, you might skip directly to Chapters 4 and 5, to assess what’s happening and what you can do to fix it.
- If you’re already working on a creative team that works well together, you might skip to Chapters 7 and 8, to see what you can be doing to improve the collaboration.

This book addresses a gap in the literature (or so my ego would like to think). Most books on team dynamics are directed to the leader of design teams. They

cover topics such as how to facilitate meetings, how to structure projects, and how to manage clients.

Designing Together instead focuses on the contributing designer, the person responsible for a portion of the project, but not necessarily the lead or the manager or the central stakeholder. It's for anyone working on a design project, because every person on the project team is ultimately responsible for its success or failure.

This Book Will Change Minds and Behaviors

Designing Together is ultimately a book about behaviors—behaviors that help designers untangle complicated situations, and behaviors that yield better outcomes on complicated projects. A slight shift in how people behave can change a hopeless argument into a productive conversation. Adopting some simple new behaviors can also change a tense, competitive landscape into a collaborative, mutually supportive environment. Adopting the right behaviors depends on having the right mindset.

Chapter 2 talks about mindset, the frame of mind that decides how someone perceives a situation, how they feel about it, and how they choose to react to it. Mindset and behaviors are linked. A person's mindset directly influences their reaction and behavior in a situation. But a mindset can be redirected, such that people can choose to react in a different way than their mindsets would dictate.

This is important: a person's mindset influences his or her behavior, but behavior also influences mindset. By adopting behaviors that go against his or her mindset, a person has an opportunity to influence how he or she perceives the world and reacts to it.

The Desired Goal: Great Design Teams

There are lots of ways to define a great design team. Greatness is, in part, measured by results. Great teams presumably produce great products, great buildings, great software, great whatever. But results alone can't measure a team's greatness. If a project yields miserable, burnt-out designers, can it really be called great? If a project focuses on a single visionary, a control freak who won't let other people make meaningful contributions, can it really be called successful?

Great design teams produce great products, but they also offer all members of the team difficult but attainable **challenges** and an opportunity to make meaningful **contributions**.

These aspects of designers yield unhealthy habits—behaviors that drive them to work too hard, to burn out, to compete with other designers, to rub clients the wrong way. This, then, is the essence of a great design team: It is one that channels designers' raw desire for challenge and meaningful contribution into healthy habits that yield great products. *Designing Together* is a guide for contributing designers to channel their desire into healthy habits.

Designers Like Challenge

Generalizations about designers may stereotype their arrogance, but spend a moment with a design team and you'll see there's really only one thing that unites them. Every designer wants to be challenged. Designers

- **Crave real-world problems:** They want to create products that make a difference in people's lives.
- **Relish reasonable constraints:** They understand that the best way to solve a problem is to do so within nonarbitrary boundaries.
- **Gravitate toward the novel:** They like to work on new things, but sometimes "new" means novel approaches to age-old problems.
- **Appreciate the esoteric:** They recognize that even the most obscure product will serve a need in someone's life.
- **Think of themselves as customers:** They acknowledge that they aren't perfect proxies for a product's users, but they love getting inside the heads of the people who will use it.

Designers Like to Contribute

Challenge is one draw for designers, but not the only one. Challenge alone is unsatisfying if designers can't make a meaningful contribution to the solution. Designers must feel that their effort has a positive impact on the design of the product. In this way, designers

- **Thrive on constructive feedback:** When designers get constructive feedback, it means someone is paying attention and believes that their ideas have some merit.

- **Seek to prove their value:** Designers have an almost constant insecurity that even their best efforts are not productive contributions to the project.
- **Overcommit themselves:** Designers struggle to say “no” to assignments because they are eager to make a contribution.
- **Struggle to relinquish control:** Designers struggle to let go of their work because they don’t want to see their effort potentially wasted through compromise and iteration.
- **Accept short-term pain for long-term gain:** Designers recognize that meaningful contributions aren’t easy, but understand that such challenges come with reward.

The desire for challenge and the desire to make a contribution, therefore, can be sources of positive behaviors, when channeled appropriately. The purpose of this book is to draw on these desires and cultivate the behaviors of healthy, happy, great teams.

This Book Is for Teams of All Shapes and Sizes

Creative teams come in all shapes and sizes. Some have just a few people, while others have dozens. Some include “non-design” roles like project coordination and product management, while others keep things focused on “creative.” (Ugh, I hate those distinctions.)

The models and behaviors described in *Designing Together* make no presumptions about the configuration, size, or location of your team:

- **Small or large:** Teams both small and large have to find ways to work with each other efficiently and effectively, whether members of the team have overlapping roles or not.
- **Inside or outside:** Teams serving internal stakeholders or consulting in an agency model each deal with clients differently. That said, the issues of alignment and collaboration are relevant in either case.
- **Remote or colocated:** Increasingly, teams do not sit in the same location. Whether all or part of your team is remote, these behaviors are relevant and important to keep things running smoothly.

How This Book Will Help Designers

If you're a contributor on a team, you'll learn

- How to be a better listener, the key skill for any designer on any team (Chapter 3)
- How to recognize, diagnose, and deal with difficult situations (Chapters 5, 6, and 9)
- How to reflect on your attitude and performance and cultivate habits to make you a better contributor (Chapters 2 and 10)
- How to incorporate new behaviors and habits into your approach to make you a better participant on the team (Chapters 11 and 12)
- How to talk to your manager or leader about what you need and how to be more effective (Chapter 7)
- How to recognize potential problems on the team (Chapter 8)

How This Book Will Help Team Leaders

As someone who leads or manages teams, you'll learn

- What habits to model and encourage among your team members for improved effectiveness (Chapter 12)
- What values your team should strive for in their interactions with each other and their stakeholders (Chapter 8)
- How to recognize a counterproductive attitude in your team members and things you can do to change it (Chapter 2)
- How to evaluate team members to understand how they can be more effective contributors (Chapter 1 and 10)

What This Book Is Not

This book is not

- **A collection of brainstorming activities:** There are lots of great books out there that suggest how to structure brainstorming sessions. Check out *Gamestorming*, by Dave Gray, Sunni Brown, and James Macanufo.
- **A collection of team-building exercises:** There are even more great books on exercises for creative teams (or individuals) to flex their muscles. Check out *Creative Workshop* by David Sherwin.
- **A manual of facilitation:** Facilitation seems to go hand in hand with collaboration, and a lot of designers are interested in learning how to facilitate meetings. This book may provide some ideas, but consider the new book *Designing the Conversation* by Russ Unger, Brad Nunnally, and Dan Willis.
- **A manual of project management:** Great collaboration depends on well-structured projects, but this book is focused on the behavior of contributors, not the exact structures of projects. For that, consider Scott Berkun's classic *Making Things Happen*.

Brainstorming, team cohesion, facilitation, and project management are all crucial parts of collaboration, but they aren't the whole of it.

A Note on Language

Throughout the book, I make several concessions on language. Please bear with some of the language contortions, as I tried to

- **Avoid being prescriptive:** I've avoided using "you" because, though I hope you, the reader, find the ideas helpful, I don't want you to feel put on the spot.
- **Avoid being gender specific:** I've used the plural to avoid making gender-specific references. This occasionally yields sentences where nouns and pronouns disagree. ("The practicing designer appreciates their team.")
- **Avoid being industry specific:** I've used the term "product" to refer to anything a designer may be working on, because I believe these ideas to be useful to any creative team. My background is in Web design, however, so many examples are drawn from that experience.

Design Depends on Conflict and Collaboration

There is one central assumption of this book:

Successful design projects require effective collaboration and healthy conflict.

Within the scope of design, healthy conflict isn't necessarily negative or turbulent. Instead, it's a process for arriving at a shared understanding. In the course of a design project, teams have to make decisions about the overall design direction, the details about the product, and how the project will proceed, among many others. Through the process of aligning on these decisions, designers experience conflict.

Through conflict, design teams work to become aligned in their understanding. Through conflict, design teams experience strife in the name of clarifying and refining decisions about the project. This process is worth the effort, because only through such discourse comes a shared understanding. Without shared understanding, team members will head off in different directions, work toward different goals, and not support each other's efforts. There are lots of ways to resolve conflict, and the single litmus test is understanding: Everyone is clear on the direction, the approach, and the desired outcome, and can work collaboratively toward those ends. And that brings us to collaboration.

Collaboration is working together to produce something that one person could not have produced on their own. Successful collaboration means each person doing his or her part to achieve the project goals. Positive collaborative relationships improve teams by enabling them to work efficiently and effectively. Through good collaboration, teams bring the best out in each other, pushing each other toward better design concepts while dovetailing each other's strengths and weaknesses to hit project goals.

Five Central Ideas

There are five ideas that permeate *Designing Together*. These concepts are fundamental: understanding them is a prerequisite for understanding how design teams can collaborate more effectively.

Behavior

This entire book is predicated on the notion that designers exhibit behaviors in the context of their project and their team. Whatever may underlie the intent of the designer, it's the behavior that impacts the efficiency and efficacy of the design team.

Behaviors can be

- **Specific:** A behavior may be a discrete action performed in the context of a particular situation. For example, repeating what someone says to you to make sure you've heard it correctly is a specific behavior.
- **General:** A behavior may be a habit in the way designers conduct themselves day to day on projects. For example, communicating progress updates every day is a general behavior.

Behaviors can also be

- **Healthy:** Healthy behaviors lead to activities that produce great design and move a project closer to its goals.
- **Unhealthy:** Unhealthy behaviors stall a project, embroiling participants in counterproductive situations. The healthy/unhealthy dichotomy is described in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Mindset

Behaviors are the embodiment of mindset (or a direct reaction to it). More than any other concept in this book, mindset permeates every word, every idea, and every recommendation.

Mindset is a person's perception of, attitude toward, and desired reaction to the world around them.

With the wrong mindset, a designer's desire to pursue challenge and make meaningful contributions will yield counterproductive behaviors. The wrong

mindset causes designers to misinterpret situations and opportunities. It encourages them to feel negatively about themselves, their performance, and their colleagues' behaviors. The wrong mindset predisposes designers to be anticollaborative.

Self-Reflection

The book rests on the assumption that designers like reflecting on their work and their performance. They consider not just what they did, but how they did it, and what they could have done better.

This book asks designers to go a little deeper, asking themselves why they might have behaved in a certain way. It asks them to consider whether they have particular preferences or styles that influence their approaches. Learning to recognize these traits can help designers overcome unhealthy behaviors and confront the insecurities that prevent them from adopting healthy ones.

Empathy

Many of the behaviors, values, and attitudes described in *Designing Together* rely on the ability to relate to someone else. Empathy is crucial for untangling a difficult client meeting, or providing constructive feedback to a colleague, or establishing roles on a project. You won't find much on empathy in this book. I do not believe empathy is teachable. What you can learn, however, are behaviors and attitudes that reflect empathy.

Design Success

Every design project will be measured differently, because each has unique goals and constraints. That said, this book presumes that design projects are generally measured along two key dimensions:

- **Quality:** How good the design is relative to the goals of the project.
- **Completion:** How close the team is to meeting the project goals.

This definition of success drives many of the recommendations in this book. It helps designers separate healthy, constructive, productive behaviors and situations from those that don't improve the design or progress the project.

Surviving Design Projects, The Game

Some of the content in this book started out as a card game for creative teams to hone their conflict management skills. The game challenges players to apply a variety of conflict resolution behaviors to difficult situations. What ensues is a fun, team-building activity that encourages people to talk about their hardest projects without making things personal.

You can find an up-to-date version of the game through the book's companion Web site: <http://www.designingtogetherbook.com>.

Thank You

Finally, thank you for reading this book. The business of design, like other service industries, is undergoing a major change. Customer-focused services like healthcare, consulting, and education are experiencing similar shifts in mindsets and behaviors.

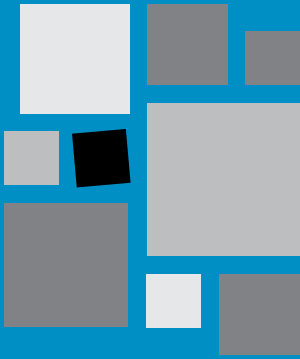
Your reading this book suggests to me that I'm not alone in sensing this change. I'm grateful to you for joining me in exploring what makes a great team and how to be a great contributor to a creative team. As you're reading about the model of conflict and the virtues of collaboration, the behaviors for better conflict resolution, and the habits of good collaborators, I hope you ask yourself questions like:

- Is this something I do? Do I do it well or poorly?
- Is this something we should be doing on my team?
- Have I seen this happen on my project? Did we handle it well? What could we have done better?

If, as you're reading, you feel like I've left something out or have your own story to share, please contact me: author@designingtogetherbook.com.



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4

The Role of Conflict in Design

THIS IS MY definition of conflict:

Conflict is the way design teams come to a shared understanding of each decision made in the design process.

Over the course of this chapter, I'll unpack this statement in more detail, focusing specifically on the phrases “shared understanding” and “decision made.”

Conflict is the engine of design. When designers come up with the initial idea, turning it over and over to make sure it solves the design problem, it is conflict that spurs that process. When designers take that idea and draw it out—fleshing out details, establishing a design's basic concept—and then take it all the way through to a specification, it is conflict that drives that growth.

These are tough conversations, but they make all the difference in the final product.

I've sweated through countless design reviews—and the best ones are also the most challenging ones. Presenting design concepts to a room full of stakeholders and getting blank stares or empty nods is the bane of my professional existence. On the contrary, put me in a room where colleagues call me out on every design decision, demand a rationale for every typographic or layout choice, and throw out lots of new ideas. These are tough conversations, but they make all the difference in the final product.

Conflict is the process through which ideas are validated and elaborated. Through conflict, ideas grow from a spark to a concept to a full-fledged design because

- **Conflict validates ideas:** Designers working together seek to understand an idea fully, so they confront each other, forcing themselves to justify every decision. They challenge each other to ground their ideas.
- **Conflict elaborates ideas:** By talking over an idea and disagreeing with it, designers force each other to fill in missing details.

When ideas are tested and expanded to the satisfaction of all involved, this is when conflict works right. Design teams, however, sometimes find themselves in conflict that doesn't move a project forward. Before explaining where conflict goes wrong, I'll describe the important role conflict plays in design.

The Value of Conflict

To demonstrate the value of conflict clearly, I'm going to oversimplify the design process. Design is, in this oversimplification, merely a series of decisions (**Figure 4.1**).

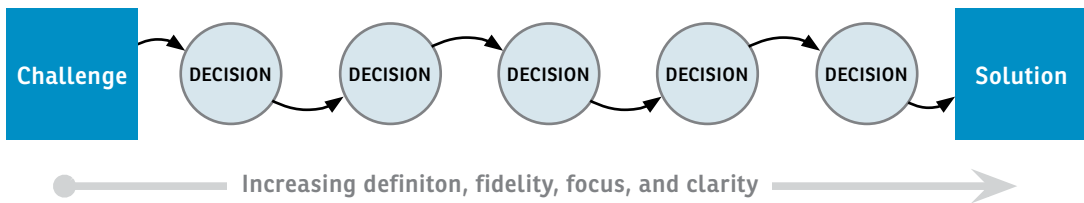


Figure 4.1. Oversimplifying the design process, design is really just a series of decisions.

Decisions may be broad, such as decisions about scope:

“We’re going to focus on how users navigate product categories.”

Or, decisions can be small, such as decisions about specific aspects of the product:

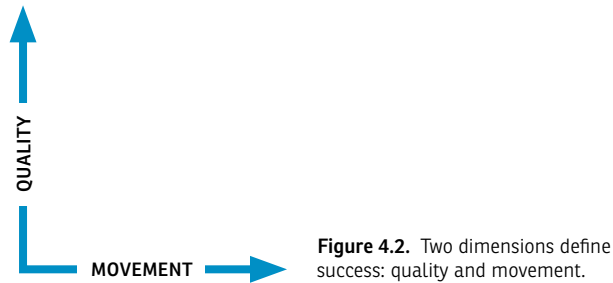
“This button should say ‘Start.’”

Making one decision allows the design team to make the next decision. That is, they can tackle the next level of detail, the next element in the product, the next challenge facing the project. One decision leads to the next.

But as most designers have come to understand, one bad decision can have devastating consequences later in the project. A simple example is a decision that implies a convention in the design of the product, like “All buttons will be orange with a white label.” Make this decision when there’s only one visible button, and the team might think all is right with the world. Realizing later they have to design an interface with a dozen buttons, the team might regret that decision. They’re now faced with another challenge: Change the convention? Or establish a new convention for this circumstance?

The design process ends when the team has made sufficient decisions to define the product. That definition addresses all the established goals (decisions early in the project) and respects all the technical constraints (perhaps later in the project). That definition is sufficiently documented for a production team to

implement the product. Design is therefore measured along two dimensions: quality and moving the project forward, which I'll call **movement** (**Figure 4.2**).



Decisions made by the design team must do two things, then. A design decision must

- **Be good.** It meets the goals of the project, for example.
- **Move the project forward.** The decision brings the conclusion of the project into greater focus, further clarifying the product definition.

OK, so the design process is a series of decisions that increasingly defines the product and yields a good product. These decisions are made collectively by the design team. And the team cooperates to make decisions. Right?

Actually, that's not true.

Not every member of the team contributes to every decision. Nor does every member of the team agree with every decision. But to move a project forward, all members of the design team must understand the decision. That is, they know

- Why the decision was made
- How the decision impacts their contribution
- How they can incorporate the decision into their work

Enter conflict. By working toward a shared understanding of design decisions, team members enter into conflict. It is through building a shared understanding around decisions that conflict manifests. That is, team members must understand how a design decision makes a better product and moves the project forward.

For example, a design team who has resolved their conflict can answer all these questions the same way (**Table 4.1**).

Table 4.1 Questions about Quality and Movement

Questions about Quality	Questions about Movement
Do you know how this decision addresses project goals?	Do you know how this moves the project forward?
Do you know how this decision can help improve the design?	Do you know what to do next?
Can you explain how the decision is appropriate to the project?	Do you know how this decision will enable (or impede) your next task?
Does this decision take the design outside the project's boundaries or constraints?	Do you know how this decision moves the project closer to success?

A shared understanding is crucial for both design quality and moving the design process forward. To get aligned on these answers, team members conflict. It's that conflict that allows them to acknowledge their lack of alignment and to work together to achieve a shared understanding.

When team members are not aligned, when they do not have a shared understanding, they can't move the project forward or make the project successful. Teams can (and often do) gloss over the conflict, but the lack of shared understanding of these decisions will negatively impact them later. On the other hand, teams that take the time to align their understanding on design decisions will ultimately bring projects to conclusion successfully.

Design Decisions and Shared Understanding

There are two parts to any design decision: the content of the decision and the method used to make the decision. The content is what was decided, generally about the design of the product itself. The method may be a technique or a rationale. It answers the question, "How did we make this decision?"

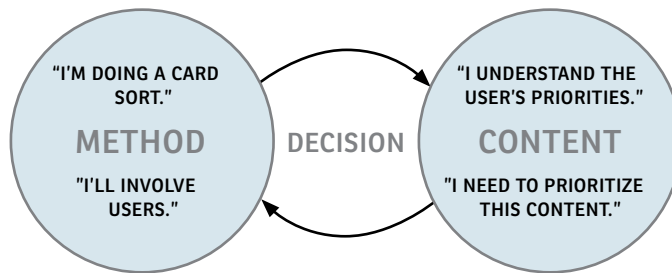
In each of the following sample decisions, the content is italicized and the method is underlined:

- We won't use *tab-based navigation* for this Web-based application because we anticipate growth, and tabs won't scale well.
- We will incorporate *context-sensitive help* in the kiosk because most users won't be experts on this process.
- We will *prioritize information about travel conditions* because usability testing indicated that this information was the most important.

In the last example, there could be any number of reasons to prioritize travel conditions, but the method chosen by this design team involved conducting usability testing.

This structure for decisions is an oversimplification. Digging into the underlying structure of a decision, between these two things, the content and the method, there's a chicken-and-egg relationship. On the one hand, the content may not yet be defined, but the designer knows what he or she needs. That is, the designer knows to ask the question, "What information do I need to prioritize in this kiosk?" The designer then decides upon a method for answering that question: the content comes before the method. Once the designer determines the answer, that's the content of the decision, and the method is what produced it (**Figure 4.3**).

Figure 4.3.
The chicken-and-egg
structure of decisions.



A team's shared understanding rests on everyone understanding both the content of the decision and the method used to reach that decision. They need to be clear on the decision and aligned in their activities for getting there (**Table 4.2**).

Table 4.2 A Shared Understanding in Making Decisions

Aspect of Decision	Required Understanding	Implication
Content	Clarity	Not everyone is going to agree with every decision ("creative differences") but team members need to be clear on the content of the decision.
Method	Alignment	Not everyone needs to agree on how the decision will be made, but they do need to understand the method being used and how they contribute to it.

Note that clarity and alignment don't necessarily mean agreement. People working on a project team may not agree with the direction set by their leads or managers. They may not agree with how those decisions are made. Designers bristle at arbitrary decisions (like unreasonable constraints in production or bizarre institutionalized business rules) but can generally get behind a decision if it's clear and they know how it impacts them.

And this brings me back to the definition of conflict. Conflict is the way design teams come to a shared understanding of each decision made in the design process. Conflict in design isn't always accompanied by negative emotions, hostility, or drama. It isn't always about disagreement. Conflict is about two (or more) people trying to understand each other, paving the way for future decisions and ultimately the project conclusion.

What Happens Without a Shared Understanding

When teams work from a disparate understanding, they risk becoming further separated as the project progresses. They make decisions individually that seem misinformed or misaligned with the rest of the team. If the team doesn't understand the boundaries of the design project, they will create concepts that are unrealistic or don't solve the problem.

Good designers may purposefully break boundaries, seeking to challenge conventions or expose new ideas. But this boundary breaking is counterproductive if they do it in ignorance, naively thrashing about without first ensuring that they have a shared understanding of the assignment. Without being able to position it as boundary breaking, they are unable to tell the story of the design concept to their team or their stakeholders. A design decision that cannot be justified is not one that will move the project closer to its conclusion.

Misunderstanding happens most often with respect to design direction and design scope.

Lack of Design Direction

When designers do not understand direction, they lack clarity on the underlying principles that are driving the design. While not every design process will articulate these principles concretely, the lead on the project is responsible for ensuring that the designers understand them. Good leads help their design

DESIGNING TOGETHER REQUIRES SHARED UNDERSTANDING AND SHARED PURPOSE



Marc Rettig

Fit Associates

In my experience the key to successfully designing together lies in paying attention, together, to the heart of the work. Design begins with understanding, and at its heart lies intention. Before you attend to the idea and expression or form of the work, attend to shared understanding and intention.

Design is a meeting of understanding and creation.

Unfortunately, “understanding” is too often confused with “explaining.” In corporate design, a tremendous proportion of the time and money spent on research and testing goes toward generating elaborate explanations. These explanations are used to make everybody feel like they are doing principled, rigorous work, with clear argument and justification for their design decisions. There’s nothing wrong with this, and in fact it is very useful for the kind of complexity we face in corporate design.

But this can be shallow and seldom provides anyone with creative fire. Explanations can bring a team together intellectually, but they rarely provide passion.

If you know that humans perceive different frequencies of light as different colors, you have an explanation. If you personally look at the world through a prism, visit places where color sets different moods, and then listen to people talk about color in their lives and the way color touches their memories and is mixed up with deep, identity-level notions like “home,” you begin to develop an understanding. And I promise you’ll begin to get excited. You might not be able to explain everything about the way your attention to color has shifted, the new ways you see and engage with the world, but you’ll know that something really important has developed inside you: a new understanding of color.

Now, give that to your team. And give it to the extended network of people who make up the larger ecosystem in which “designing together” takes place and on which it depends for the work to get out into the world. You give it to people by giving them personal experiences. Don’t outsource “research.” Get out there together! Do what it takes to provide yourselves with a shared understanding of the people, contexts, activities—the lives you are about to affect with your decisions. The degree to which your team is mingled with the lives it will affect is a predictor of the degree of its collective understanding, which is also a predictor of its passion and sense of purpose, which is a key to the quality of the work.

John Bielenberg of Future Partners suggests this activity: "This is 10 by 10 by 10: By the end of the day, everybody will visit 10 places, talk to 10 people, and bring back 10 stories." As someone who has participated in dozens of ethnographic design research projects, I believe more than half of them would have been better served by involving the team and its extended network in a round of 10 by 10 by 10.

Designing together begins with understanding together, and at its heart lies shared intention. The second key to successfully designing together is to work from a shared purpose.

An intention is different from a goal, a mission, a design brief, or a business mandate. It is a statement about how the world will be improved by the work you are doing together. I recommend writing them in the form of a question: "How can we...?" But you don't have to write it down. You just need to arrive at it together, and it needs to emerge from your shared understanding.

Once you've been out there, once you've collectively acquired the sort of excitement and altered vision I described in the color example, get in a circle and talk about what really matters. This may be different from the charter or question that brought the team together, but it's going to feel like something worth fighting for. Be bold. Shed your sense of limitation, of being "small" relative to the organization you're working in or the complexity of the situation you're addressing. If you feel excitement in your solar plexus, if you find yourselves in a frontier mood, a fighting mood, a lover's mood, you're finding an intention that can sustain a team through a project. Once you have found the calling you all want to say "yes" to, all that's left is "how."

Now you've got something. You have people who share a connected understanding of a slice of the world, a slice of life. People who have agreed to work together for a purpose that lights them up. You have the beginning of design, and you have the heart of design. And you've begun to do the work together. ■

teams internalize them, such that they can make decisions relying on those principles. For example, a designer potentially wastes time (i.e., money) laying out screens for a Web site that don't follow an implicit set of principles determined at the beginning of the project. The lack of shared understanding here might be from

- **Misunderstanding the design direction:** The creative director did not provide a clear set of principles to drive the design.
- **Misunderstanding the constraints:** The team didn't clarify the project's or the design problem's boundaries, so the designer produced things that were hopelessly unrealistic.

Lack of Design Scope

A designer could waste time creating designs for the wrong thing. The design team can easily understand that the assignment entails designing a marketing site for a large high-tech product company. But perhaps they aren't fully aware of which pages to focus on, or that they shouldn't touch the site's primary navigation, or that they can't rely on certain product information being available.

Conflict can be uncomfortable for some people, but recall that conflict is good for design—it's the engine that makes design productive. As the understanding of a project's goals or direction diverges, that discomfort becomes more pronounced. Good teams detect and resolve conflicts as they arise. Yes, they understand the risk of not addressing conflict, but more importantly they know that the product is better for it.

Obstacles to a Shared Understanding

Some design teams hardly think of this as conflict; they are used to the dance necessary to achieve a shared understanding. Experienced teams with a good rapport can sense this shared understanding, or lack thereof, and know, almost at an intimate level, what it takes to resolve it.

Rarely do designers have the opportunity to work consistently in such an environment. Instead, new people and new challenges are injected into design jobs all the time. The conflict becomes front and center in these situations. Experienced designers understand they need to go through a learning process: they need to learn how to work with this new set of people.

But cultivating this rapport and empathy takes time. Until then, you may encounter obstacles that prevent you from engaging in productive conflict:

- **Misconception:** People may think they understand, but they really don't. That is, they believe they have a shared understanding. Unless you can confront them—test their knowledge, so to speak—you won't know for sure.
- **Ego:** People refuse to admit they don't understand. Call it stubbornness, pride, or just plain old naive optimism; some people's personalities prevent them from copping to their misunderstanding.
- **Disinterest:** People don't care enough to figure it out. We've all encountered the colleague who stinks of that classic fragrance, "I'd rather be somewhere else." Whether they are aware of their own lack of understanding, they choose not to clarify.

Reaching a shared understanding usually means overcoming these obstacles first, and then engaging in meaningful conflict—that is, conflict that produces useful decisions. But these obstacles produce a form of conflict in and of themselves—what I call “unhealthy conflict.”

Healthy vs. Unhealthy Conflict

Conflict is a loaded word, and when I ask groups whether they can do design successfully without conflict, they are, well, conflicted. Beyond the mere “lack of alignment and clarity,” conflict also has a negative connotation. It is often associated with violent emotion, drama, and a lack of desire to agree.

In this meaning of conflict, the word embodies an obstacle to overcome, something for our hero (you, of course) to defeat. In this meaning of conflict there are winners and losers. People who see conflict only in this way seek to push their design through and piss off everyone around them.

So, this isn't the kind of conflict that is the engine of design. It's the engine of sociopathy.

Unfortunately, these two versions of conflict can look, on the outside, very similar. Arguments and even emotion can play a role in both kinds of conflict. The

key difference is their intent. Are the participants trying to further the design? Are they arguing in service of the project? Or are they just trying to win?

I distinguish these two kinds of conflict as healthy and unhealthy. Healthy conflict moves projects forward by building momentum or contributing to quality—or, hopefully, both. Unhealthy conflict yields no progress on the project, no better design solution.

Distinguishing Between Healthy and Unhealthy Conflict

Unhealthy conflict can create an obstacle that prevents teams from talking about disagreements that matter. In other words, one person’s personal or stylistic issues can prevent the team from successfully engaging in meaningful discourse. Therefore, designers must recognize the differences between these things and do what they can to avoid being the source of unhealthy conflict.

Perhaps this is the designer’s greatest challenge: conflict is good for design, but pointless arguing is counterproductive. Arguing wherever and whenever possible, therefore, is not a safe gamble. The occasional productive conversation isn’t worth it if no one wants to work with you.

Unhealthy conflict is easy to recognize because it’s personal. I had a client say to me, “This is all wrong. You got this all wrong.” Throwing failure in someone’s face, deserved or not, is the fastest way to divert a conversation. My immediate reaction was to get defensive. In this case, the defense mechanism manifested itself as redirecting blame: I insisted that she was constantly changing the project objectives. Her only response was to deny that. We got, no surprise, nowhere.

You can recognize unhealthy conflict when people

- Lash out at designs without a rationale for their critique: “This sucks.”
- Attempt to undermine a team member’s creative skills without constructive criticism: “This is clearly above you.”
- Attack other aspects of the designer’s style or approach: “You’re so disorganized.”
- Defend their own actions: “I told you how to prioritize the requirements.”

These phrases represent real situations, and their messages are important, but the phrasing is purposefully antagonistic. People who have the good of the project in mind (not their own self-interest) will position these messages differently (**Table 4.3**).

Table 4.3 Recognizing Unhealthy Conflict

The statement...	...tries to...	It could...	...by saying...
"This sucks."	Undermine the designer's self-confidence.	Help the team zero in on a design direction.	"Help me understand some of the decisions you made."
"This is clearly above you."	Elevate the speaker over other members of the team.	Simplify the scope of the task or assignment.	"Seems like you're spinning. Which parts can I help with?"
"You're so disorganized."	Deflect attention from the design challenge.	Help the team prioritize tasks.	"Are you having trouble prioritizing?"
"I told you how to prioritize the requirements."	Deflect attention away from the speaker's shortcomings.	Align the team's understanding of the design problem.	"How did you interpret the priorities I gave you? Let's make sure we're on the same page."

Unhealthy Conflict as a Mask

If healthy conflict is all about achieving a shared understanding, then surely unhealthy conflict has nothing to do with understanding. Right?

In reality, unhealthy conflict is a smokescreen for potentially healthy conflict. That is, the misalignment and lack of clarity surrounding design decisions that feed healthy conflict are the same as those that feed unhealthy conflict. The difference is how participants choose to react. There are two ways this can happen, but both yield the same result—defensiveness.

- They have anxiety about not understanding the decision. They realize they do not understand the decision, so they lash out to protect themselves, to prevent others from realizing they do not understand.
- They have anxiety about the decision itself. For one reason or another, they don't like the decision made (whether they understand it or not), and they lash out to protect themselves.

Anxiety from Not Understanding

Admitting ignorance is one of the central tenets of resolving conflict. By admitting you don't know, you create an opportunity for someone else to help you understand. People still struggle with this. People believe themselves to be judged on what they know, and on proving that they know it. Combine this with an “unhealthy” view of conflict—that every conflict has winners and losers—and people are bound to behave counterproductively.

Anxiety from the Decision Itself

Decisions come with implications: tasks to complete, milestones to hit, activities to perform. As people come to understand how a decision impacts their responsibilities or expectations, they may activate defense mechanisms if the implication exposes perceived weakness.

Converting Unhealthy Conflict to Healthy Conflict

Designers may not see it as their responsibility to deal with every jerk that walks into their professional life. Indeed, not everyone can have a “no asshole rule.” Designers, however, are not always at liberty to choose with whom they work.

All the jerks I've encountered thrive on reactions. Emotion sets their anxiety at ease. They've shifted focus away from their inadequacy or ignorance, setting it squarely on their opponent's shoulders. By picturing the jerk as someone without the means for expressing himself in a productive way—literally missing that mechanism from his brain—the situation looks different.

Once you've depersonalized this person's attack, it becomes a starting point for a real conversation. To ease the transition to a productive conversation, try redirecting the topic at hand (**Table 4.4**).

Table 4.4 Snappy Answers to Stupid Statements

Unhealthy Statement	Constructive Response
"This sucks."	"Let's start at the top. What isn't working about the header? Too much information crammed in there?"
"This is clearly above you."	"Let me walk you through the design to help you understand the decisions I made."
"You're so disorganized."	"Let me walk you through the process, and I can give you some insight into where I'm at and where I'm going."
"I told you how to prioritize the requirements."	"My takeaway from that conversation was that requirements 2, 5, and 9 were most important. I used those to drive the design. I'll explain how. If there are different priorities now, let's talk about them."

The Nature of Resolution

The next two chapters discuss techniques for assessing difficult situations and coming to a shared understanding. The conclusion of those two things—figuring out what to do and then doing it—yields resolution.

Within the context of a “shared understanding” definition, resolving conflict means achieving a shared understanding. In creative conflicts, there are five kinds of resolution. That is, after a conflict there are five ways people come to a shared understanding:

- Persuasion
- Iteration
- Perspective shift
- Deferred decision
- Common ground

No one type of resolution is better than the other. It's not like persuasion will always lead to the best design or a deferred decision is always bad. The value of a resolution is determined by the situation and the ultimate outcome.

These types are inventoried here to help teams carve a path toward resolution. By understanding the situation and prioritizing the conflict, members of the team can behave to achieve a particular resolution.

To explain these different kinds of resolutions, I'll use a sample scenario throughout, showing how different decisions might be resolved:

Dan and Nathan are collaborating on a web design project for a large publication. The publication has thousands of articles already published online across three different Web sites. Ostensibly, these sites are geared toward different audiences. The scope of the assignment is huge: the publication has asked them to redesign the user experience from the ground up, integrating these sites.

Persuasion: One Adopts the Other

Persuasion is when one person convinces another person to adopt his or her position.

Example: Dan and Nathan have two different ideas on how the publication should be organized moving forward. Dan believes the publication should eliminate the three separate properties. Nathan believes that the publication should preserve the distinctions. After discussing it, Nathan convinces Dan that preserving the separate properties makes the most sense given project constraints.

Iteration: They Reach a Compromise

Iteration happens when participants discuss their ideas, revising and refining them to the point where a new idea emerges.

Example: Dan and Nathan feel pretty strongly about how to organize the new site. After trying to persuade each other, they spend half a day sketching different ideas. (They invite Jody and Veronica, too.) After several rounds of sketching, a new concept emerges. There are aspects of Dan's original idea and Nathan's original idea, but this is a new one altogether.

Perspective Shift: One Looks at It Differently

When one person shifts his perspective, he chooses to look at the situation differently. By doing so, he is more willing to adopt another person's position. This isn't so much persuasion (as the first person isn't convinced that the position necessarily makes sense) so much as letting the process take its course.

Example: Nathan has sketched some ideas very early in the project and wants to show them to the client. Dan worries that showing too much too soon will

compromise the design process. He believes they need to iron out more of the underlying architecture before exposing the client to screen design ideas. Nathan worries that showing the client abstract drawings of Web site architecture will cause them to “spin” needlessly. Nathan decides that though he doesn’t believe the process works better this way, giving Dan a chance to share architecture drawings will help him learn more about the client.

Deferred Decision: They Decide to Hold Off

When participants opt not to make a decision at all, they are deferring the decision. This may seem like the easy way out, but responsible teams understand that decisions deferred now turn into challenges later. Responsible teams also understand when they don’t have enough information to make a decision. Deferring decisions makes sense when the team recognizes that they need more inputs.

A deferred decision is toxic when the team is simply incapable of making a decision. Deferred decisions are productive when everyone willingly decides to “sleep on it,” and they have a rationale for doing so.

Example: Having zeroed in on the overall structure of the site, the design team needs to make a decision about the underlying navigation. While users will have several ways to filter articles, the team recognizes that they need to prioritize one mechanism as primary. They’re torn between a content type approach (long form versus short form, for example) and a topic approach (environmental news versus medical news, for example). Dan and Nathan weigh different approaches, realizing that they don’t have good criteria for making a final decision. They defer it, giving Dan the action item to comb through user research to identify potential inputs into the conversation.

Common Ground: They Agree on Something

Coming to common ground means going back to fundamentals that everyone agrees on. By reeling back to those items everyone has in common, the design team sets the stage for exploring the decisions again.

This is, in a way, a form of deferred decision. Instead of acknowledging the need for further inputs, though, the team acknowledges that they are at an impasse because they can’t agree on anything. Finding some mutually agreeable starting point gives the team the right mindset for seeking out some

solution. At best, it creates a platform for building together, and at worst, it helps them identify where their paths may diverge.

Example: Dan and Nathan decide they can't resolve their conflict, acknowledging that the problem may be more fundamental. As they're talking, they open a document that describes the project charter. They review each of the project's goals, design principles, and high-level requirements. They reaffirm their agreement on these and their respective prioritization.

Evaluating Resolutions

Describing the nature of the resolution is helpful for planning your response to conflict. But none of these descriptors offers a value judgment. How do you know if a resolution is good?

At the beginning of this chapter, I defined the criteria for design decisions. A good design decision must be good and move the project forward.

Resolving conflict is one way of making a decision. Therefore, a resolution can also be evaluated by these criteria. Mapping possible resolutions to these two criteria, there are four possible outcomes (**Table 4.5**).

Table 4.5 Two-by-Two of Resolution Outcomes

		Movement	
		Good design, poor movement	Good design, good movement
Quality	Good design, poor movement	Some resolutions lead to good design ideas, but don't actually move the project forward. Think: sketching over and over again, burning away budget and schedule, while crafting the perfect experience.	These resolutions produce good design ideas (meeting the goals of the project) and get the project closer to completion. Think: project team that knows what they need to do to solve the design problem and move forward.
	Poor design, poor movement	These resolutions do not solve the design problem, nor do they represent meaningful steps toward the project conclusion. Think: generating lots of crap, and having no clue about how to move things forward.	Poor design, good movement

These are the criteria by which you should be judging the outcome of your decisions. To revisit some of the examples, let me elaborate on how they might be good decisions (**Table 4.6**).

Table 4.6 Example Resolutions

Resolution	Is It Good?
Nathan persuades Dan to separate the publication into three separate properties.	<p>Quality? The decision adhered to the project goals and requirements.</p> <p>Move forward? The decision allowed the team to elaborate on the design further.</p>
Nathan changes his perspective and agrees to let Dan share architecture artifacts with the client.	<p>Quality? This is a resolution about process. In this case it is good because it will adhere to client expectations. It avoids potentially confusing them.</p> <p>Move forward? While it doesn't move the project as quickly (Nathan's objection), getting feedback from the client will help the design team understand the client's disposition toward certain kinds of design conversations.</p>
Dan and Nathan decide to defer the decision about the underlying navigation.	<p>Quality? It's too soon to judge, but they opted to gather more information before making a commitment. More information will help them determine what is good.</p> <p>Move forward? By deferring the decision, they arguably kept the project stagnant. They understood the risk, however, and chose that path rather than making a hasty decision that was difficult to undo.</p>

So specific kinds of resolutions do not necessarily lend themselves to bad outcomes. Ultimately, the circumstances (not the type of resolution) determine whether a decision is good or not.

TL;DR

This chapter provided a foundation for understanding conflict. It started with two assumptions:

- Design is, when oversimplified, a series of interconnected decisions.
- A decision comprises two parts: the method used to make the decision and the content of the decision itself.

With that understanding, the chapter elaborated on conflict:

1. When people on the design team do not have a shared understanding of a design decision, they experience conflict.
2. There are three things that can prevent a shared understanding: misconception, ego, and disinterest.
3. Conflict is healthy when it moves people closer to achieving a shared understanding.
4. Unhealthy conflict is conflict for its own sake, and is usually caused by someone acting defensively.
5. There are five types of resolution—persuasion, iteration, perspective shift, deferred decision, and common ground—but none of these is better than another.
6. The real criteria of a resolution are the same as those for a design decision: Does it yield good design? Does it move the project forward?



Index

A

- adaptive versus rigid mindsets 25–26, 29–30
- AmoebaCorp 84
- assertive versus passive mindsets 28–30
- assignment sharing 123
- attitude in mindsets 21–22

B

behaviors

for collaboration

- ask questions that yield specific answers 231
- centralize decision making 231
- clarify expectations regarding ability and delivery 232
- communicate progress 232
- don't hog opportunities 232
- embrace constructive criticism 233
- embrace risk 233
- employ tools that yield meaningful outcomes 233
- encourage disruptive communications 234
- engage in dialogue 234
- engage multiple senses to communicate 235
- establish role definitions 235
- give others room to learn from mistakes 236
- have communications plans 236
- have decision-making mechanisms 237
- have objectives for every discussion 237
- have project plans 236
- keep meetings focused and short 237
- know when you're "spinning" 238
- offer direct critiques 238
- play to strengths 239
- provide rationales for decisions 239
- recognize contributions 240
- reduce competition 240
- reflect on your performance 241
- respect calendars 241
- set availability expectations 242
- set performance expectations 242
- using 228–230

for conflict resolutions 65–66

- acknowledge achievements 211
- anticipate agendas 211
- ask for first step 212
- ask for help 212
- ask for stories 211
- ask questions 212

behaviors, for conflict resolutions (continued)

- assert your process 213
- blame "bad cop" 213
- call their bluff 213
- capture lessons learned 214
- change channels 214
- change metaphors 214
- channel colleagues' best qualities 215
- come back later 215
- common ground 67–68
- communicate implications 215
- consider micro/macro perspectives 216
- consider your work/their work 216
- convert failure to action 216
- deferred decision 67
- draw pictures 217
- enumerate issues 217
- evaluating resolutions 68–69
- frame conversations 217
- go back to basics 218
- help me help you (The Jerry Maguire) 218
- help me make this better 218
- help me prioritize 219
- hold workshops 219
- iteration 66
- list assumptions 219
- make assumptions 220
- make it real 220
- make plans (logistics specifics) 220
- offer alternatives 221
- offer sneak peeks 221
- perspective shift 66–67
- persuasion 66
- pick one thing 221
- pick your battles 222
- prioritize portfolios 222
- provide starting points 222
- recount previous conversations 223
- reduce assignments 223
- reflect positions 223
- seek small victories 224
- set reasonable expectations 224
- show goals 224
- show your work 225
- take baby steps 225
- take responsibility 225
- treat it like project 226

Belman, David 44–45

Bielenberg, John 59
 brainstorming techniques 123
 Brown, Mandy 142–143
 Brown, Sunni 123

C

calendar sharing 122
 causes of conflicts. *See also* behaviors, for conflict resolutions; conflicts in design
 external sources 83, 86–90, 98
 ambiguity and patterns for clarity 89–90, 100
 disconnectedness and patterns for reconnecting 86, 100
 exclusion and patterns for inclusion 87–88, 100
 misdirection and patterns for focus 88–89, 100
 internal sources 76–82, 98
 method conflict 76–79
 outcome conflict 80–82
 closed doors, obstacle to listening 47–48
 Coleman, David 112
 collaboration
 behaviors for
 ask questions that yield specific answers 231
 centralize decision making 231
 clarify expectations regarding ability and delivery 232
 communicate progress 232
 don't hog opportunities 232
 embrace constructive criticism 233
 embrace risk 233
 employ tools that yield meaningful outcomes 233
 encourage disruptive communications 234
 engage in dialogue 234
 engage multiple senses to communicate 235
 establish role definitions 235
 give others room to learn from mistakes 236
 have communications plans 236
 have decision-making mechanisms 237
 have objectives for every discussion 237
 have project plans 236
 keep meetings focused and short 237
 know when you're "spinning" 238
 offer direct critiques 238
 play to strengths 239
 provide rationales for decisions 239
 recognize contributions 240
 reduce competition 240
 reflect on your performance 241

collaboration, behaviors for (*continued*)
 respect calendars 241
 set availability expectations 242
 set performance expectations 242
 using 228–230
 communication technology obstacles 120–121
 culture of 119, 128
 evaluating corporate culture 146
 obstacles 128–129
 definitions
 versus groupthink 115–116
 working together 112–115
 mindsets of 119, 126
 adjusting mindsets 145–146
 obstacles within individuals 126–128
 misconceptions about
 ineffectiveness and inefficiency 118
 oversimplification 117
 wrong focus 118–119
 perspectives
 corollary of 113
 multiple 114–115
 production
 corollary of 113
 distributing 115
 tools of 119, 122–126
 selecting tools 144–145
 transparency of 142–143
 virtues of
 accountability and ownership 134–137, 143
 awareness and respect 137–139
 clarity and definition 133–134
 in day-to-day operations 147
 effecting changes in teams 228–229
 effecting changes in yourself 229–230
 evaluating use of virtues 147–148
 openness and honesty 139–141
 collective versus solitary mindsets 26–30
 commitments
 admitting mistakes 13
 practice 13
 ways to ask for and make 12–13
 conflicts in design. *See also* behaviors, for conflict resolutions; causes of conflicts
 definition 52
 example of model in action 108–109
 examples of conflict 90–93
 healthy versus unhealthy 61–62
 converting unhealthy to healthy 64–65
 distinguishing between healthy/unhealthy 62–63
 unhealthy conflict as mask 63–64
 mutual impact of components 106–108

- conflicts in design (continued)
 - patterns 97, 99–100
 - disconnectedness and patterns for
 - reconnecting 86, 100
 - empathize 100, 107, 208
 - exclusion and patterns for
 - inclusion 87–88, 100
 - involve 100, 107, 208
 - misdirection and patterns for
 - focus 88–89, 100
 - principles for using 208–209
 - redirect 101, 107, 208
 - reframe 101, 107, 208
 - traits 97, 101
 - assessing new colleagues 102–105
 - assessing your traits 105–106
 - self-awareness 102
 - value of 53, 59–61
 - decision content and methods used 55–57
 - lack of shared understanding 57, 60
 - obstacles to understanding 60–61
 - quality and movement 54–55, 68
 - culture of collaboration 119, 128–129
- ## D
- Daft, Richard 120
 - design documentation, controversy over 20
 - design process
 - diamond model 114
 - step-by-step flow 7
 - design project situations
 - design ignorance 154
 - distractions
 - by internal competition 155
 - by shiny objects 156
 - don't know what we need 157
 - efforts ignored 158
 - excluded from planning 159
 - false consensus 160
 - inconsistent expectations 161
 - insufficient progress 162
 - irrelevant comparisons 163
 - lack
 - of clear inputs 164
 - of context 165
 - of decision maker 166
 - of stable strategy 167
 - late-breaking requirements 168
 - misinterpretation of tone 169
 - new perspectives 170
 - no plan 171
 - no time to design 172
 - not a team player 173
 - design project situations (continued)
 - overpreparation 174
 - poorly composed feedback 175
 - poorly planned presentation or discussion 176
 - reluctant participation in design activities 177
 - responses not timely 178
 - separated from key stakeholders 179
 - tasks and goals not aligned 180
 - uncoordinated collaboration 181
 - unfounded design direction 182
 - unreasonable constraints 183
 - using 152
 - wrong scope 184
 - design teams
 - basic values
 - empathy 10
 - humility 9
 - learning behaviors 10
 - respect 9, 45
 - shifting mindsets 10
 - goals and priorities, principles of
 - discounted novelty 6
 - meaningful marks 6
 - personal/professional alignment 6, 58–59
 - designers as contributors
 - attributes of effective contributors 14
 - definition 2
 - design versus non-design work 11, 14
 - evaluating
 - methods 16
 - why mindset 17–18
 - getting to no 15
 - playing well with others 14–15
 - self-awareness 14, 139
 - Theory of Professional Reconciliation* 11
 - designers' common traits 97, 101, 186–187
 - adaptability 189
 - adherence to style 190
 - assessing
 - new colleagues 102–105
 - your traits 105–106
 - assumption threshold 191
 - creative triggers 192
 - defining challenges 193
 - desired cadence 194
 - dogmatism 195
 - format for feedback 196
 - giving/getting recognition 197
 - knee-jerk reaction 198
 - level of abstraction 199
 - mutual impact of components 106–108
 - Myers-Briggs assessment 106, 187
 - perception of control 200
 - preferred environment 201

designers' common traits (continued)

- preferred perspective 202
- project load 203
- self-awareness 102
- structure of design reviews 204
- transparency 205
- using traits effectively 188

diamond model of design process 114

disconnectedness and patterns for reconnecting 86, 100

disposition in mindsets 21–22

document sharing 123

Dweck, Carol 20, 26

- mindset model 22
 - fixed versus growth mindset 22–23, 25, 27
 - groupthink 116
 - importance to designers 23–24
- Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* 22, 116
- “praised generation” 30

E

Editorially 142–143

embattled egos, obstacle to listening 48–49

empathize pattern 100, 107, 208

evaluating designers as contributors

- methods 16
- why mindset 17–18

exclusion and patterns for inclusion 87–88, 100

external sources of conflict 83, 98

- ambiguity and patterns for clarity 100
- disconnectedness and patterns for reconnecting 86, 100
- exclusion and patterns for inclusion 87–88, 100
- misdirection and patterns for focus 88–89, 100

F

featured contributors

- Belman, David 44–45
- Brown, Mandy 142–143
- Hall, Erika 12–13
- Jacobs, Denise 84–85
- Knoll, Jonathan “Yoni” 31
- Rettig, Marc 58–59
- Turner, Jeanine Warisse 120

feedback 123

file sharing 123

fixed versus growth mindsets 22–23, 25, 27

42 Rules for Successful Collaboration 112

Future Partners 59

G

Gamestorming 123

goals and priorities, design teams

- discounted novelty 6
- meaningful marks 6
- personal/professional alignment 6, 58–59

Gray, Dave 123

groupthink versus collaboration 115–116

growth versus fixed mindsets 22–23, 25, 27

H

Hall, Erika 12–13

I

Idea Revolution 84

InfinityPlusOne 31

instant messengers 122

internal sources of conflict 98

- method conflict 76–79
- outcome conflict
 - performance decisions 80–82
 - plan decisions 80, 82
 - product decisions 80–81
 - purpose decisions 80, 82
- involve pattern 100, 107, 208

J

Jacobs, Denise 84–85

Jobs, Steve 2

K

Knoll, Jonathan “Yoni” 31

L

Lengel, Robert 120

listening skills

- breaking basic rules 43
- listener's checklist 35–36
 - paraphrase 42–43
 - pause 39–40
 - prepare 36–38
 - probe 40–41
- obstacles to listening
 - closed doors 47–48
 - embattled egos 48–49
 - short circuits 46–47
- speaking same language 44–45

M

- Macanugo, James 123
- member selection, design teams
 - commitment 12–13
 - diverse composition 5
 - minimal internal risks 5
 - multiple hats 4–5
 - ownership 5
 - professional growth 5
- method conflict 76–77
 - decision justifications 77–78
 - patterns for identifying 79
 - value of 78
- methodologies 7
- Michalko, Michael 123
- Mindset: *The New Psychology of Success* 22
- mindsets
 - of collaboration 119
 - adjusting mindsets 145–146
 - obstacles within individuals 126–128
 - and designers
 - adaptive versus rigid 25–26, 29–30
 - assertive versus passive 28–30
 - assumptions about design projects 24–25
 - best for designers 24–30
 - changing mindsets 30, 32
 - collective versus solitary 26–30
 - composed of attitude, disposition, and perception 21–22
 - importance to designers 23
 - required mindsets 20
 - Dweck’s mindset model 22
 - fixed versus growth mindset 22–23, 25, 27
 - groupthink 116
 - importance to designers 23
 - “praised generation” 30
 - shifting of 10
 - misdirection and patterns for focus 88–89, 100
 - model of mindsets (Carol Dweck)
 - fixed versus growth mindset 22–23, 25, 27
 - groupthink 116
 - importance to designers 23–24
 - “praised generation” 30
- Mule Design Studio 12

O

- obstacles to listening
 - closed doors 47–48
 - embattled egos 48–49
 - short circuits 46–47

- outcome conflict
 - performance decisions 80–82
 - plan decisions 80, 82
 - product decisions 80–81
 - purpose decisions 80, 82

P

- paraphrase, listener’s checklist
 - repeating what you heard 42
 - validating our interpretations 43
- passive versus assertive mindsets 28–30
- patterns in conflict 97, 99–100. *See also* behaviors,
 - for conflict resolutions
- empathize 100, 107, 208
- external sources
 - disconnectedness and patterns for reconnecting 86, 100
 - exclusion and patterns for inclusion 87–88, 100
 - misdirection and patterns for focus 88–89, 100
 - involve 100, 107, 208
 - mutual impact of components 106–108
 - principles for using 208–209
 - redirect 101, 107, 208
 - reframe 101, 107, 208
- pause, listener’s checklist
 - allowing speakers to finish thoughts 40
 - asking for whole story 39
 - demonstrating visually that you heard 40
- perception in mindsets 21–22
- performance conflict 80–82
- personas 17
- plan conflict 80, 82
- playing well with others 14–15
- “praised generation” 30
- prepare, listener’s checklist
 - asking for visuals 38
 - capture tools 36–37
 - devising capture tools 36–37
 - eliminating distractions 37
 - establishing framework for discussion 38
 - thinking of next question 37
- presence indicators 122
- probe, listener’s checklist 40–41
 - asking questions without judgment 41
 - redirecting when speaker gets off topic 41
 - using cues to encourage elaboration 41
- product conflict 80–81
- product decisions 80
- product teams. *See* design teams

project parameters
 context 8
 physical constraints 8
 principles of
 full definition 8
 parameter flexibility 9
 reasonable constraints 8
 scope 8
 project teams. *See* design teams
 purpose conflict 80, 82

R

Rams, Dieter 2
 Rand, Paul 2
 redirect pattern 101, 107, 208
 reframe pattern 101, 107, 208
 resolution behaviors for conflicts 65–66
 acknowledge achievements 211
 anticipate agendas 211
 ask for first step 212
 ask for help 212
 ask for stories 211
 ask questions 212
 assert your process 213
 blame “bad cop” 213
 call their bluff 213
 capture lessons learned 214
 change channels 214
 change metaphors 214
 channel colleagues’ best qualities 215
 come back later 215
 common ground 67–68
 communicate implications 215
 consider micro/macro perspectives 216
 consider your work/their work 216
 convert failure to action 216
 deferred decision 67
 draw pictures 217
 enumerate issues 217
 evaluating resolutions 68–69
 frame conversations 217
 go back to basics 218
 help me help you (The Jerry Maguire) 218
 help me make this better 218
 help me prioritize 219
 hold workshops 219
 iteration 66
 list assumptions 219
 make assumptions 220
 make it real 220
 make plans (logistics specifics) 220
 offer alternatives 221
 offer sneak peeks 221

resolution behaviors for conflicts (continued)
 perspective shift 66–67
 persuasion 66
 pick one thing 221
 pick your battles 222
 prioritize portfolios 222
 provide starting points 222
 recount previous conversations 223
 reduce assignments 223
 reflect positions 223
 seek small victories 224
 set reasonable expectations 224
 show goals 224
 show your work 225
 take baby steps 225
 take responsibility 225
 treat it like project 226

Rettig, Marc 58–59
 Richardson, Mikey 84
 rigid versus adaptive mindsets 25–26, 29–30
 roles and responsibilities of team
 members 3–4, 134–137

S

screen sharing 123
 short circuit, obstacle to listening 46–47
 situations in conflict model
 internal and external sources 98
 mutual impact of components 106–108
 situations in design projects
 design ignorance 154
 distractions
 by internal competition 155
 by shiny objects 156
 don’t know what we need 157
 efforts ignored 158
 excluded from planning 159
 false consensus 160
 inconsistent expectations 161
 insufficient progress 162
 irrelevant comparisons 163
 lack
 of clear inputs 164
 of context 165
 of decision maker 166
 of stable strategy 167
 late-breaking requirements 168
 misinterpretation of tone 169
 new perspectives 170
 no plan 171
 no time to design 172
 not a team player 173
 overpreparation 174

situations in design projects (*continued*)

- poorly composed feedback 175
- poorly planned presentation or discussion 176
- reluctant participation in design activities 177
- responses not timely 178
- separated from key stakeholders 179
- tasks and goals not aligned 180
- uncoordinated collaboration 181
- unfounded design direction 182
- unreasonable constraints 183
- using 152
- wrong scope 184

software tools for collaboration 122–123

solitary versus collective mindsets 26–30

Surviving Design Projects situation cards 73

T

techniques and methods

- activities to achieve milestones 7
- methodologies 7
- principles of
 - appropriate activities 7
 - novel use 7
- step-by-step processes 7

Theory of Professional Reconciliation 11

Threespot 44

time tracking 123

Tinkertoys 123

to-do sharing 123

tools of collaboration 119

- characteristics of 122
- creative techniques 123–124
- obstacles of 124–126
- software 122–123

traits common in designers 97, 101, 186–187

- adaptability 189
- adherence to style 190
- assessing new colleagues 102–105
- assessing your traits 105–106
- assumption threshold 191
- creative triggers 192
- defining challenges 193
- desired cadence 194

traits common in designers (*continued*)

- dogmatism 195
- format for feedback 196
- giving/getting recognition 197
- knee-jerk reaction 198
- level of abstraction 199
- mutual impact of components 106–108
- Myers-Briggs assessment 106, 187
- perception of control 200
- preferred environment 201
- preferred perspective 202
- project load 203
- self-awareness 102
- structure of design reviews 204
- transparency 205
- using traits effectively 188

Turner, Jeanine Warisse 120

Typekit 143

V

values for design teams

- empathy 10
- humility 9
- learning behaviors 10
- respect 9, 45
- shifting mindsets 10

video chats 122

virtues of collaboration

- accountability and ownership 134–137, 143
- awareness and respect 137–139
- clarity and definition 133–134
- in day-to-day operations 147
- effecting changes
 - in teams 228–229
 - in yourself 229–230
- evaluating use of virtues 147–148
- openness and honesty 139–141

voice chats 122

W

Warmke, Clare 84



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