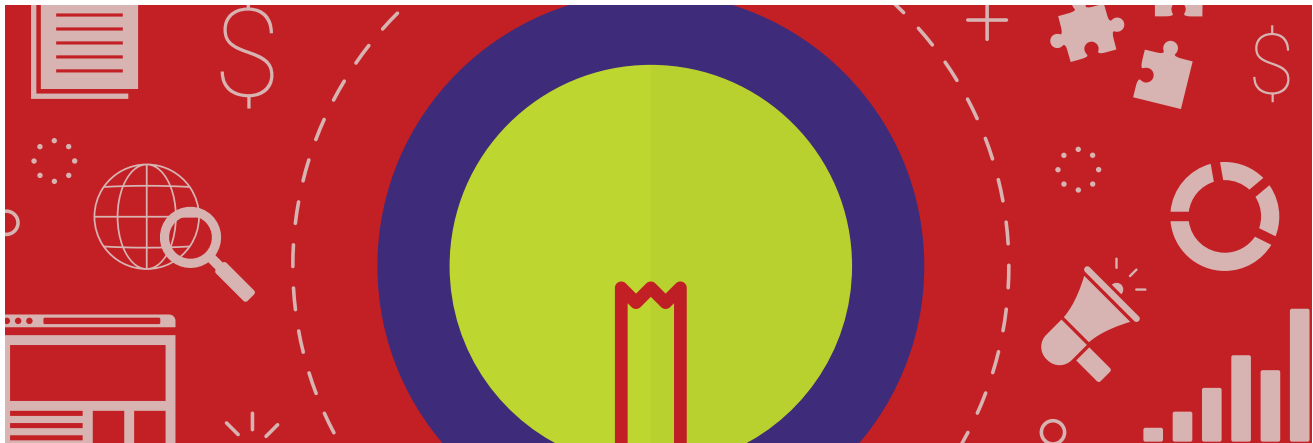# td
at work

DESIGN THINKING MEETS ADDIE

Kathy Glynn and Debra Tolsma

atd
LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

DESIGN THINKING MEETS ADDIE

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What do you do when the senior executive of your function tells you to "innovate" and globalize leadership development? Besides hanging on for dear life, you turn to your company's innovation process and methods—human-centered design or "design thinking."

When we were first approached with this tall order, our dedicated learning and development staff, in partnership with human resources business partners around the world, were doing their best to address the pressing issue of leader readiness, yet we continued to miss the mark.

Blending design thinking methods with typical instructional design methods based on human performance improvement (HPI) and ADDIE (analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation processes) helped us launch a leadership curriculum that met the business needs of our project sponsor and global leaders, as well as their social and emotional needs. That's the magic of design thinking.

Rather than delving into the intricacies of design thinking, we will show in this issue of *TD at Work* how we used design thinking with traditional learning and development methods of ADDIE. In doing so, we will provide answers to these questions:

- What is design thinking?

- Why does it matter to me as a learning and development professional?

- How can I use design thinking with HPI and ADDIE?

WHAT IS DESIGN THINKING?

Design thinking is a hot topic right now. An Internet search will net some 23 million results. But what exactly is design thinking? Here are the definitions from some design thinking leaders:

- a discipline that uses the designer's sensibility and methods to match people's needs with what is technologically feasible and what a viable business strategy can convert into customer value and market opportunity (Tim Brown, CEO of IDEO)

- a halfway house between analytical thinking—for the purely deductive and inductive logical thinking that utilizes quantitative methodologies to come to conclusions—and intuitive thinking, or knowing without reasoning (Roger Martin, dean of the Rotman School of Management)

- the ability to turn abstract ideas into practical applications for maximal business growth (Jeanne Liedtka, professor at the Darden School of Business).

In addition to the multiple ways of defining design thinking, there are also a variety of design thinking methodologies from places such as the LUMA Institute, IDEO, the Stanford d.school, and the Illinois Institute of Technology's Institute of Design.

The bottom line is that design thinking is a human-centered approach to innovation or problem solving that instills deep empathy. It integrates the needs of people with the needs of the organization.

DESIGN THINKING AND THE LEARNING FUNCTION

Organizations are looking for better results, especially in leadership development. We chose to leverage design thinking within our established learning and development processes because we wanted to fully understand what it meant to be a frontline and first-time leader, what was working and not working, and what we could be doing better to support our leaders so they might be more effective and successful.

It takes deep empathy to understand what people want and need. That's why design thinking was such a natural fit for this initiative. It gave us the tools to uncover unmet needs, frustrations, and possibilities.

We had to think differently about the challenge that was given to us. Innovating the development experience for our company's leaders was only

part of the story. Innovating our own processes would be key to our success.

This issue of *TD at Work* gives an example of how you might use design thinking in your learning and development role. Whether you're a performance consultant, instructional designer, trainer, or L&D leader, there's something here for you. The following sections will show how we connected design thinking with each of the ADDIE steps, along with elements from human performance improvement.

> DESIGN THINKING IS A HUMAN-CENTERED APPROACH TO INNOVATION OR PROBLEM SOLVING THAT INSTILLS DEEP EMPATHY.

HOW DESIGN THINKING CHANGED ANALYSIS

As we began our project, here's what we knew:

- The organization was changing rapidly; its CEO of 19 years was retiring, and another senior executive was moving into the role.

- We had to develop leaders for a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world.

- Traditional leadership training was falling short.

- Something had to change—but what?

When we created the project plan, we couldn't know what this project would reveal. We knew that the human performance model was a

WHEN ADDIE MEETS EMPATHY

As ADDIE practitioners, we conduct interviews, document organizational and individual performance results, and identify measures and skill and knowledge requirements to determine the level of instruction needed.

We need to do this; we should do this. Yet, as we do, we create distance between our work and the actual performer in the role. Empathy closes that distance.

According to Connie Henson and Pieter Rossouw, in their book *Brainwise Leadership*, there are three components of empathy:

- the ability to feel what others feel

- the ability to understand others' mental states

- the motivation to help others by sharing or understanding their emotions.

As design thinkers, you know you've developed empathy for your stakeholders when your own ideas take a back seat to the expressed frustrations and unmet needs of your primary audience. This was true for us, and one of the first times we felt this pull was during a focus group session.

We assembled a small group of frontline managers who were relatively new to their roles. As we made our way through a series of questions, they became reflective—and more thoughtful. Their responses became personal as they shared the challenges and frustrations of being leaders.

Some of the things we heard were "If I have to choose between leading people and meeting project deliverables, I'll meet the project deliverables." "I was just thrown into this role. I haven't received any training for it. If I want training, I have to figure it out."

In the group was a bright and talented woman we had known for several years, a product manager, leading a team from the company's largest business units. As the conversation unfolded, she put her hand on Deb's wrist and said, working to hold her emotions in check, "I know there is something important about leading. I just don't know what it is."

For the members of the team in the room that day—and for others with whom we shared this and other stories—there was no turning back. We were compelled to solve this problem, help these leaders, and in doing so, help our company. We had experienced empathy.

given, as was ADDIE. We had sound and proven processes, and we had no reason to embark on this adventure with anything but our trusted toolkit. It was a safe and logical assumption that training would be part of this solution.

But we soon discovered that a laser focus on the performer and the desired performance in a rapidly changing organization was insufficient. The expectation to globalize our leadership development changed the game—even more than our charge to innovate did.

> IT TAKES DEEP EMPATHY TO UNDERSTAND WHAT PEOPLE WANT AND NEED.

Framing the Problem

As the project unfolded, what we thought was going to be an innovative curriculum became more about the experience of being a leader for the company.

With this expanded scope, the team took a step back from our standard starting point—business analysis (although we did come back to it later). Instead, we leveraged a design thinking approach called *framing an opportunity* or *a central question*—that is, framing the problem—about leaders, leading, and leadership for the company: *What are the elements of a leadership infrastructure in a globally integrated enterprise?* This compelling question drove our curiosity and our research plan.

Design thinkers practice divergent thinking to get a 360 perspective. That meant going beyond standard business and performance analysis practices of determining business goals, relating them to the performance of company leaders, and determining the gap between the desired and actual performance state.

We researched the entire ecosystem of leading and leadership—beyond the performers and their environments. This required us to look outside the organization to identify broader economic, cultural, and leadership trends. For example, we read the DDI Global Leadership Forecast and combed through websites and periodicals, such as the *Harvard Business Review* and ATD blogs and publications. We accessed data from our company's internal cultural survey to better understand what was happening inside our organization. We attended workshops, webinars, and seminars. We read books—lots of them.

FIRST UP: PROBLEM FRAMING

We were handed a grand challenge: Determine the leadership capabilities for a 21st-century leader that were unique to our organization. It was a bigger and more "wicked" problem than we had faced in our years as performance consultants. And we knew that our senior executive had high expectations for what we'd discover.

The question was, where should we begin?

Human-centered design demands that we truly and deeply understand the problem and its effect on others. It requires us to give up our own notions of the right answer or best solution and immerse ourselves in exploring the problem from multiple points of view and perspectives. That takes time. And it's not always easy, especially if you're new to this way of approaching problems.

But it is possible. It takes a willingness to continually revisit and revise the problem/opportunity statement as you learn more. This is key to innovating in a way that delivers long-term value to the people you hope to serve.

The way you frame your problem determines how you think about it. If you frame your problem too narrowly, your solutions will be constrained and predictable. If you frame your problem too broadly, your solutions could be vague and of little value.

The problem statement becomes your North Star. It will guide everything you do. All your activities should be to advance your understanding about the problem.

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