Design Thinking Basics: Five Simple Steps

"Bias toward action," "Collaborate across boundaries," "Focus on human values," "Be mindful of process," "Prototype toward a solution," "Show don't tell." These are useful sayings that just about anyone can use at any time, but what exactly do they mean?

These little truisms provide the foundation of design thinking; a five-step problem-solving methodology pioneered by David Kelley, the founder of the global design consultancy IDEO (responsible for well-known inventions like the Apple mouse and portable heart defibrillator) and Stanford University's Hasso Plattner Institute of Design (d.school). What started as a trendy concept a few years ago is now moving mainstream and being taught at several universities and all across corporate America. In fact, just last month, the Harvard Business Review cover story featured "The Evolution of Design Thinking."

Once used only for new product development, design thinking has become a centerpiece of strategy, innovation and organizational culture and change. Indeed, design thinking, also known as user or human-centered design, is now used for everything from developing a network of low-cost private schools in Peru and redesigning the lunch room experience in San Francisco city schools to getting younger people to contribute more to their savings accounts.

At its very core, design thinking is based on the idea that if you want to create value—through a product, service or process—it is essential to first understand the needs and emotions of the people who will use it. That person could be a consumer who buys a household good, an employer who aims to craft a new vacation policy or a client who looks to maximize user adoption of a new Product Lifecycle Management (PLM) system.

Companies from Pfizer and Airbnb to Jet Blue and Hyatt have used design thinking to uncover and meet user needs through five simple steps: Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype and Test.

- **Empathize**: Learn about the audience for whom you are designing
- **Define**: Construct a point of view based on user needs and insights
- **Ideate**: Conduct an expansive brainstorm to come up with creative solutions
- **Prototype**: Build representations of idea(s) to show to users
- **Test**: Return to original user to test for feedback and iteration

It's the relentless focus on the end user, combined with the requirement for constant user feedback and iteration through rapid, low-resolution prototyping that sets design thinking apart from other problem-solving methodologies.

In addition, there are several other qualities that make this methodology unique:

- Design thinking is a hands-on immersion project with bias towards action
- Design thinking doesn't analyze the problem. Instead it starts with possibilities
- Design thinking challenges the question then reframes the problem
- Design thinking sits at the heart of feasibility, viability and usability/desirability

Aside from delivering breakthrough new product, service and process ideas, design thinking can also help innovation leaders build and lead high-performing teams and enable and sustain organizational change. In our next article, we will discuss how.

Learn More:

How to Design Enterprise Systems with the End User in Mind

Additional Reading:

- *Change by Design*, by Tim Brown
- *Creative Confidenc*e, by David Kelley and Tom Kelley
- *The Art of Innovation*, by Tom Kelley
- *Designing for Growth*, by Jeanne Liedtke