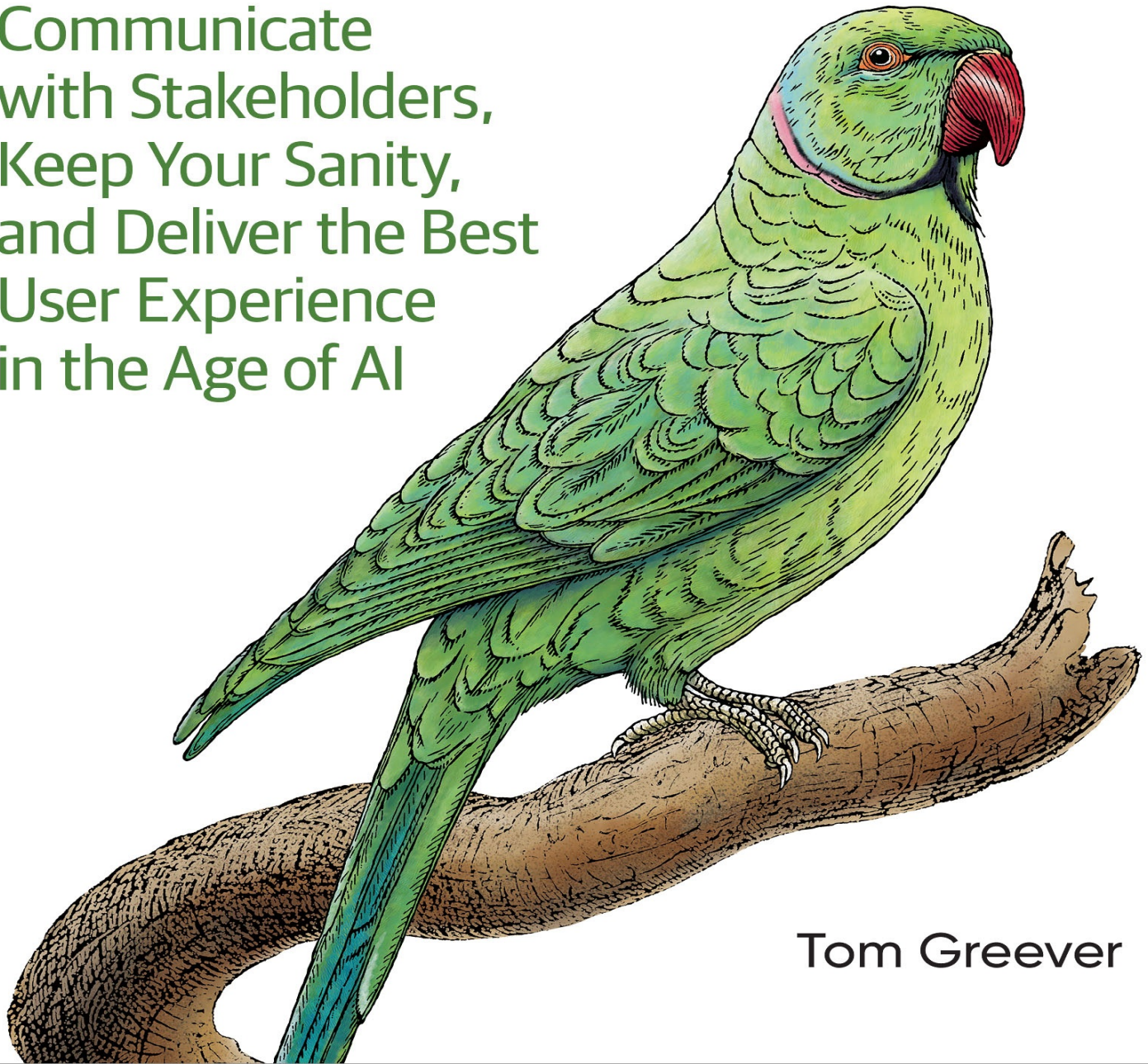
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3rd Edition

Articulating Design Decisions

Communicate with Stakeholders, Keep Your Sanity, and Deliver the Best User Experience in the Age of AI



Tom Greever

Praise for *Articulating Design Decisions*

"Articulating Design Decisions is a must-read for anyone involved in design, whether it's product, software, or brand design. And by involved, I mean having any part of it. This is a book that's helpful to engineers, product managers, and executives as much as it is to designers."

—Christian Manzella,
Senior Director and Head of UX, Samsung

"Articulating Design Decisions by Tom Greever will change the way designers talk about design. Get it, read it."

—Tim O'Reilly, Founder and CEO, O'Reilly Media

"Tom has done a great job tackling one of the more difficult aspects of design...talking to others who aren't designers and sharing the how and why of the design decisions that you made."

—Aaron Irizarry, Head of Credit Solutions Design, Capital One, and author of Discussing Design

"While most books on design mention these communication issues as a sidebar or a footnote, Tom gives us an entire book of tried and tested tools to make designers expert communicators. True to its title it is easy to read and even easier to recommend. As the

principle of a UX design firm I'm thrilled that Tom has given us this gem of a book."

—Richard Banfield, VP of Design Transformation, InVision, and author of Design Leadership

"Tom's book is essential reading for designers looking to be in control of how their work is consumed by stakeholders and clients. This book is an easy-to-read guide with applicable tips to articulating product decisions with authenticity, confidence, and clarity."

—Christy Ennis-Kloote, Design Principal, OpenDigital

"Articulating Design Decisions will give you an applicable framework to learn how to best present your design work to your stakeholders and clients. It is full of real-life examples and stories that make it very engaging."

—Cynthia Savard Saucier, Design VP

"Being able to 'give good meeting' is a superpower. Especially for designers, who too often presume that the most important thing about a meeting with stakeholders is the design work they bring to the table. Tom shows from experience that the success of this kind of meeting, in fact, depends more on stakeholders being able to understand what they're being shown. This book provides the frameworks, planning steps, vocabulary, and (if you need them) ready-to-use paragraphs of well-formed and aptly phrased expressions in the English language that designers need to begin explaining how their work solves real problems, makes things easy for users, and deserves support from the organization."

—Dan Klyn, Information Architect and Cofounder, The Understanding Group (TUG)

"Articulating Design Decisions elegantly tackles the challenge with communicating design decisions by providing a simple

approach that can allow designers (and teams!) to get alignment on their designs. It is not enough to just make the design; you need to communicate the why behind the decision and frame it in the context of the problem it intends to solve. Every designer, and product team member for that matter, could benefit from this."

—C. Todd Lombardo, VP of Product, MachineMetrics, and coauthor of Design Sprint and Product Roadmaps Relaunched

"Whether you're a designer, developer, product manager, content strategist, information architect, or marketing or sales professional, chances are you've had to present design ideas to stakeholders at one point or another. It's hard. Everyone has an opinion about what you're presenting. And they should—what you're building reflects on the brand and is one of the primary modes for customers or consumers to interact with your company. People you work with care because they have a stake in the success of the things that you design. If you want to get better at talking about, presenting, and getting buy-in for those things, this book is an excellent place to start. Tom Greever identifies tactics and solutions for tackling tough organizational challenges that will help you not just do better work, but get that work recognized and where you want it most: to market."

—Donna Lichaw, Founder and CEO, SuperPowered, and author of The User's Journey: Storymapping Products That People Love

Praise for the Third Edition

“Articulating Design Decisions is so much more than advice on design communication. It is a masterclass on working well with partners, stakeholders, and executives. It has made me a better designer and more persuasive leader. It is chock-full of actionable tactics that you can apply today to improve your effectiveness regardless of your level. Many books discuss theory, but this book has an actionable practicality that is rare. It’s the kind of book I find myself coming back to—for both my own learning and in coaching with my teams. I only wish I had found it earlier in my career. It could have saved me from learning many lessons the hard way.”

—Jeremy Bird, Former Sr. Product Design Manager, Xometry and Target

“I have read this book twice, three years apart, and learned something different each time. The book’s depth is unassuming. It will teach the two-year designer the fundamentals. It will teach the tenured designer mastery. It carries specific, actionable nudges that have helped me conduct myself in high-stakes situations. I often refer more junior designers on my team to this book to help them improve their meeting management, strengthen their stakeholder relationships, and become better advocates for their decisions without my getting involved.
Ultimately, this book is a mirror that helps you see yourself clearly and offers practical advice for improvement.”

—Edgar Anzaldua, Experience Design Leader and Coach, @ edgar.design (https://edgar.design)

“This edition excels by focusing on what it has always done best: mastering the human psychology of cross-functional alignment. Rather than chasing tech hype, Greever approaches AI pragmatically as just another tool in the modern workflow. By seamlessly updating the case studies to reflect today’s reality

without losing its core philosophy, this book remains a timeless resource. The true value lies in its practical framework for navigating the complex stakeholder matrices that enterprise design leaders face every single day."

—Yadhira "Yaddy" Arroyo, AI Experience Architect, Conversation Designer, and Inventor (15 US Patents)

3rd Edition

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Communicate with Stakeholders, Keep Your Sanity, and Deliver the Best User Experience in the Age of AI

Tom Greever

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Articulating Design Decisions

by Tom Greever

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[Preface]

People often ask me why I wrote this book, and I have to tell you: it was more accidental than inspired. At least at first. I didn't really set out to write a book at all. In hindsight, it feels a little more like the book set out to find me.

In 2014, I applied to speak at my first UX conference, and part of the process was submitting three ideas. I had two I thought were pretty good, but I needed a third, so I threw in one called "Articulating Design Decisions." At the time, it seemed boring. Every designer has to justify their decisions, right? This didn't exactly seem like a breakthrough concept.

Naturally, that's the one they chose. And so I had to figure out how in the world I was going to come up with something useful to say about it. I started thinking more intentionally about how I communicated with people about design: the approaches I used, what seemed to work, and what practical advice I could offer other designers.

But at the conference, something weird happened. When the talk ended, there were tons of questions. So many people came up to the stage afterward that they had trouble getting us out of the way for the next speaker. People were excited. Emotional, even. The message I kept hearing was that I had finally put words to something they had been feeling for years but didn't know how to handle. I seemed to have struck a chord. Touched a nerve, maybe.

A few months later, I gave the same talk at another conference, and more or less the same thing happened. I could hardly get out of the room afterward. People told me, "No one is talking about this" or "They don't teach this in school." Designers had spent years learning tools, process, and craft, only to enter an industry that sometimes felt more like a game of survival. "Why didn't anyone tell me this was part of the job?" That's when I realized I had stumbled onto a real pain point.

O'Reilly was a sponsor of that conference, and afterward one of their editors asked if I would consider turning the talk into a book. I said yes. I had no idea what I was getting into.

Honestly, I didn't expect much to come of it. At the time, it was more like, *Why not?* I'd take these ideas, expand on them, and maybe they would help a few people. If I was lucky, the book would sell some copies, eventually fade into the background, and make a nice line on my resume.

Instead, it became something much bigger than I expected. The thing I originally thought was boring—the thing I did every day and considered just part of the job—turned out to be something a lot of designers wanted to get better at but didn't know how. The problem was more acute than I had realized.

That taught me something I've carried with me ever since: The thing you think is boring? The thing you're so good at that you don't even realize what you know? That might be the most valuable thing you can share with someone else. What comes naturally to you may be exactly what someone else is struggling to learn.

Writing the book also caused me to look differently at my own work. I started noticing all the places where better communication led to better design. I realized that many of my favorite designers weren't just good at making things; they could intelligently explain why they made the decisions they did. And I noticed that much of the feedback I gave my own team had less to do with their ability to design and more to do with how they communicated their work.

Over time, something became very clear to me: the way we talk about design has a significant impact on whether good design actually gets made. Design doesn't succeed on craft alone. Our work depends on other people understanding it, supporting it, and helping us move it forward. And this is a skill many designers—even very senior designers—still struggle with. You can create the best solution in the world, but if you can't get the people around you to understand and support it, that design may never see the light of day.

What This Book Is About

The purpose of this book is to help designers become better communicators —*articulate designers*—who can clearly explain their decisions, work effectively with stakeholders, and build the support necessary to move good ideas forward.

That happens throughout the design process, not just when we present our work. We need to understand the people who influence our projects, establish principles for making decisions, listen carefully, facilitate productive conversations, respond to feedback, and maintain confidence and momentum even after the meeting ends. Sometimes that happens in a formal presentation with a room full of people. Other times it's a quick conversation, a video call, a comment in a design file, or a message sent over chat. The setting changes, but the skills are largely the same.

Throughout this book, I'll suggest practical things you can do: ask better questions, write things down, anticipate reactions, create alternatives, prepare evidence, and practice what you want to say. You certainly won't do all of these things every time. Sometimes you'll have days to prepare; other times someone will catch you off guard and you'll have seconds to respond. The goal is to practice these skills until they become habits: things you can draw on naturally when you need them.

And let me be very clear: this is not about an "us versus them" mentality where designers are right and stakeholders are obstacles we have to overcome. Articulating design decisions is about making our thinking visible, understanding the perspectives of the people around us, and creating the trust necessary to work through disagreements together.

That also means this book isn't about learning how to talk people into a design that isn't good. Your decisions should be thoughtful, informed, and grounded in a real understanding of the problem. But you should also be open to the possibility that you've missed something. A stakeholder may have information you don't, identify a constraint you haven't considered, or simply have a better idea. The goal isn't to win. It's to communicate well enough that everyone can understand the reasoning, evaluate the options, and move toward the best decision together.

Who Should Read This Book

This book is written primarily for designers working with other nondesigner stakeholders: graphic, web, UX, interaction, interface, or visual designers.

DESIGNERS

If you've ever had the experience of a stakeholder insisting on a change that you disagreed with, this book is for you. It's common for designers to feel as if their own expertise and judgment are being overruled by stakeholders who know less about design. This book is meant to bridge that gap and help you communicate your thinking clearly, work through disagreements, and build support for good decisions.

SENIOR DESIGNERS

You might think you've been doing this long enough that you're already pretty good at articulating design decisions. That may be true. But the more senior you become, the more your effectiveness depends on your ability to communicate, influence, and facilitate—not just your ability to design. The conversations become more consequential, the stakeholders more varied, and the problems less likely to be solved by design expertise alone.

And articulating design decisions isn't a skill you master once and never think about again. It takes continued practice and deliberate effort. Experience helps, but even experienced designers can communicate poorly when they're caught off guard, frustrated, or simply haven't prepared. This book provides practical approaches you can continue to sharpen and apply throughout your career.

THE WHOLE PRODUCT TEAM

Although this book is written primarily for designers, the problems it addresses aren't unique to design. Researchers, developers, content strategists, product managers, and others also have to explain their thinking, respond to feedback, navigate disagreement, and build support for their work.

How This Book Is Organized

This book is organized into five parts that build on one another. We'll start by looking at communication itself: why it's such an important part of being a designer, the skills you need to be articulate, and how to establish a framework for making better design decisions.

From there, we'll turn our attention to stakeholders. We'll look at how to better understand the people we work with, identify what they value, and build the influence necessary to work effectively together.

Next, we'll get into the conversations themselves: designing and facilitating productive meetings, processing the feedback we receive, adding our own expertise, and documenting the decisions that come out of those discussions.

Then we'll focus on how to respond. We'll look at how to lead with a yes, choose a strategy, draw from common messages, and bring those pieces together into what I call the *IDEAL Response*.

Finally, we'll look at what happens after those conversations: creating visibility, maintaining confidence and momentum, and dealing with the inevitable changes that come with working alongside other people.

While I wrote the book to be read in order, and the ideas intentionally build on one another, please don't take that as a rule. This is your book. Skip around. Jump ahead. Go directly to the chapter that solves the problem you're dealing with today. If you're already skilled in one area, you have permission to turn the page. You can always come back later.

And while the chapters give these ideas some structure, real conversations are rarely so tidy. You won't consciously work through every technique every time you talk about design. The goal is to build a collection of skills, habits, and approaches you can draw from when you need them. Over time, many of them should become so natural that you barely realize you're using them.

An Ongoing Conversation

One of the best parts of writing this book has been everything that happened afterward. I've met so many great people through it, and the conversations and stories they've shared with me have been invaluable. People have told me the book changed their career, helped them earn a promotion, or simply gave them something to try in a difficult meeting.

I've also had the opportunity to lead dozens of teams through workshops where we practice and refine these skills together. Those experiences have changed how I think about the subject too. What started as an attempt to document what I knew has become an ongoing conversation about how designers communicate, collaborate, and get good work into the world.

I'd love to hear from you too. Feel free to reach out, add me on LinkedIn, or share a story about how you've dealt with this problem. Mostly, I hope the book will help you.

Add me on LinkedIn: *https://www.linkedin.com/in/tomgreever*.

All the templates, examples, and resources are available on my website at *https://tomgreever.com/resources*.

You can find plenty more articles, podcasts, and videos about this topic on my website: *https://tomgreever.com*.

Differences Between Editions

No major spoilers here, but this section is mostly for those of you who have read one of the previous editions and are wondering what's different.

The first edition was good, if a little rough around the edges. It was my first book, and I didn't really understand what it would be like to have thousands of strangers interpreting my every word without me standing there to clarify what I meant. Had I known how many people would eventually read it, I probably would have taken a little more care with some of those words.

The second edition was partly an attempt to clean that up. I clarified ideas people had misunderstood, removed things that distracted from the message, and tried to make sure my sense of humor didn't accidentally undermine what I was trying to say. By then, I had also spent several years

speaking, leading workshops, and talking with teams about the material. So I added things I had learned were missing and generally made the book a little more mature.

This third edition is a more thorough revision, and a lot has changed. I've reorganized and rewritten large portions of it around what I now believe are the most important ideas. Skills that were previously scattered throughout the book are now brought together intentionally, while topics like documenting decisions and establishing principles, guidelines, and standards have become much more prominent. I've also substantially revised ideas like leading with a yes, which turned out to be both the most impactful and most misunderstood advice in the previous editions.

And, of course, there's AI. The way we generate ideas, explore alternatives, conduct research, create prototypes, and even make design decisions is changing quickly. I've tried to account for that throughout this edition without turning this into a book about AI. The tools will change. The need to think clearly, exercise good judgment, communicate our reasoning, and work effectively with other people won't.

Perhaps the biggest difference, though, is simply that I'm different. I have more than 10 additional years of professional experience as a designer and design leader, and I've spent those years talking to people about this specific subject. I've taught it to teams, coached individuals, heard what worked and what didn't, watched people misunderstand certain ideas, and learned from how other organizations approach the same problems. It's been an incredibly rewarding experience.

Somehow, without really intending to, I became something of an expert in this oddly specific corner of the design profession. The first edition captured what I knew at the time. The second corrected and refined it. This edition is the result of everything I've learned since, applied back to the book that started it all.

Acknowledgments

This year, my wife Hannah and I celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary. Neither of us could have imagined that so many years later she'd be supporting me while I sat around the house rewriting a book about how to

talk to other people. Although maybe that's exactly the kind of book a person married to me would expect me to write.

Hannah is my favorite human. She's much smarter than me and has contributed more to this book than she'd ever admit. Through three editions, she has listened, encouraged, and supported me every step of the way. This book is better because of her.

Our five kids deserve some credit too. They've grown up with this book being written, rewritten, and talked about around the house to the point that its concepts and phrases have become part of our family lore. They've seen its principles firsthand at school, in job interviews, playing sports, and in their own entrepreneurial endeavors; sometimes just showing up and being articulate is all it takes to stand out from their peers. Watching my kids learn that for themselves has been one of my favorite unexpected outcomes of writing this book.

I also owe a huge thanks to the reviewers: Edgar Anzaldua, Kaaren Hanson, Dave Pinke, Jeremy Bird, John Hunter, and Yadhira "Yaddy" Arroyo. This book is much more accurate and significantly more helpful because of their help.

Last, I have to thank all of my existing and previous clients, managers, leaders, and executive stakeholders. Without you, this book would not be possible. In fact, every person who has ever worked with me is in some way a part of this book. I became good at talking about design because of you. I had to! You gave me no choice! I learned these skills through years of working with *you*, and now it's time for me to share it with the world.

[Part I]

Communication Is the Job

[1]

Great Designers Are Great Communicators

Have you ever had to make changes to your design work you disagreed with? Me too! It's not easy to talk about design, especially with people who aren't designers. Yet, the ability to effectively articulate design decisions is critical to the success of any project, because *the most articulate person usually wins*. In fact, I would say that the difference between a good designer and a great designer is in their ability to not only solve problems with design but to also articulate how their solution solves it in a way that's compelling, fosters agreement, and gets the support needed to move forward. That's what this book is about: getting support for your design decisions by becoming an *articulate designer*.

Lots of people are involved in our design process. People from all over the organization see the value of creating a great user experience and will tell you how they think it should look and work. Because the user experience has a visible and long-term effect on the product, everyone is going to have an opinion. The good news? You're a very popular person!

The Big Important Meeting

Several years ago, I had to catch a late flight to San Francisco for a meeting. It was one of those Big Important Meetings: a dozen people from different areas of the company were all presenting designs to the CEO.

Vice presidents, directors, product owners, engineers, and designers had all planned a three-hour event just to get this one executive's support! We had spent the better part of two weeks planning, rehearsing, and making slides. There were meetings about the meeting[1] and late nights getting everything just right. We traveled across the country and then spent a whole day in a conference room. All of this just to get support for our design work.

What struck me about this whole thing was the amount of effort that was going into just communicating design ideas to one person. The amount of time the designers spent actually creating the mockups was trivial compared to the time and energy that went into finding the best way of communicating them. *Communicating about the designs was more important than the designs themselves.*

Not every team or meeting is like this, but the principle is still the same. The way we talk about design work with stakeholders is critical to the success of our projects. It might be even more important than the design itself.

Design Is Subjective...Sort Of

When I interview designers for a role on my team, I always ask them, "What makes a good design good?" The way people answer this question tells me a lot about how they think about design and UX. Most of the answers are predictable, but they often speak to an aesthetic—a level of subjectivity that not everyone will agree on. One of my favorites was "when you can't remove anything else." While I get that there can be fuzzy thinking around why we make certain decisions in design, in the context of a business, many of those explanations won't hold up to scrutiny. We need a better way.

The truth is, all design is subjective. What one person likes, another person hates. What seems obvious to me might not be obvious to you. What works in one context could fail miserably in another. This is why design is such a difficult thing to talk about, especially with people who aren't designers. There is little common understanding of what design is or should be.

Too Many Cooks

It would be easy to create designs if it weren't for the fact that other people on the project might disagree with our decisions. Actually, they will!

There are a lot of people who may know little or nothing about design yet who have the authority to oversee and dictate our design practice. They have a vested interest in our work, but they likely don't have the same depth of knowledge in design or technology that we do. It turns out that in the world of making design decisions, other people are our biggest challenge!

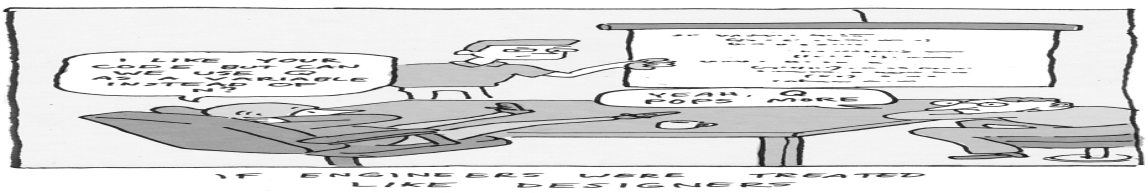
Ironically, these people will often admit that they aren't the experts. They know that they don't know, yet they'll still insist their ideas and opinions are right. It's weird. People will readily admit they are not good at our jobs yet insist on making changes against our recommendations. They'll say we are the experts and then frequently overrule us.

It can be incredibly discouraging and confusing, but the problem may not lie entirely with them. Sometimes we're contributing to the problem ourselves. I've seen many situations where an executive simply asks a question or offers an idea out loud, intending to start a discussion, and the team immediately interprets it as a directive. "What if we moved this over here?" quickly becomes, "The VP wants this moved." In reality, they may have been brainstorming just like everyone else. This is what we need to figure out.

Everyone Is a Designer!

And as if that weren't complicated enough, now anyone can design anything these days using their favorite AI tools. Not that long ago, we were somewhat insulated from the stakeholder-as-designer conundrum because the barrier to entry was specialized design tool knowledge. Sure, stakeholders have always given us sketches, used PowerPoint as a design tool, or just provided links to other designs they liked. But in those cases, they knew these weren't production-ready solutions. Now, the outputs from generative AI look an awful lot like something they could ship right away. And the temptation is almost too great. "Why can't you just use this?"

Regardless of their access to design tools, the truth is that everyone knows good design when they see it, even if they can't create it or explain it. Consider this: I may not know how to play an instrument, but I can decide what music I like (and don't like), regardless of whether I know how to reproduce those sounds myself. The same is true for design, even if what our stakeholders like isn't the goal.



Andy Zelman, Skeleton Claw Comics. (Used with permission: http://skeletonclaw.com)

There Is No U or X in Team

It gets even more complicated when you add more people, more roles, and more possible outputs. We want to have healthy collaboration, but it's hard. Collaboration seems like it should be the essence of great design work: different opinions coming together to find the best possible solution. We expect to passionately debate possibilities, ultimately leading to a collaborative discussion and an ideal solution that no one could have thought of on their own. Teamwork!

In reality, it gets far more complicated when we disagree with one another. Often, we're not actually disagreeing about the solution itself. We're disagreeing about what's most important. One person is optimizing for speed, another for simplicity, another for business goals, another for technical feasibility. Because we're solving different problems in our own minds, we end up talking past each other. When we disagree, we tend to become defensive. When we become defensive, we fail to focus on the real issues. The meeting ends, not with collaboration but with grumbling compromise and, often, a crippled user experience.

Meetings like this can easily turn into design-by-committee. Everyone has an idea. One suggestion evolves into something else. That idea changes the scope. Unchecked, the conversation can spiral out of control into a collection of well-intentioned tweaks that collectively ruin the experience. The thing we came together to accomplish has been muddied by groupthink and mob mentality. Remember, team*work* always ends with work.

THE CEO BUTTON

Because of this, we see things like the *CEO button*:

> The CEO button is an unusual or otherwise unexpected request from an executive to add a feature that completely destroys the balance of a project and undermines the very purpose of a designer's existence.

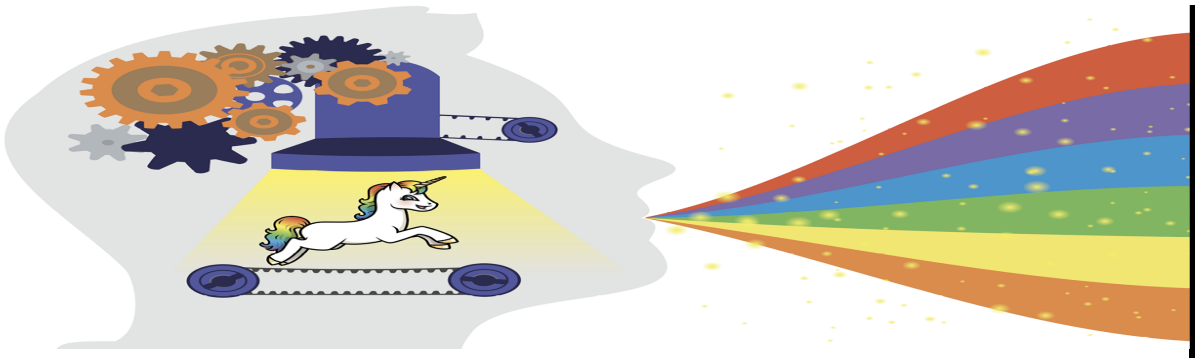
Maybe you don't work directly with the CEO, but we've all had this experience. It's funny because it's true. You might spend weeks or months building the best possible app. Your team has poured in all the best practices, and you've even done usability testing to prove it works. And yet, one executive can come in and blow up the whole thing. We want to avoid this.

You may have heard this referred to as the HiPPO, which stands for the Highest Paid Person's Opinion. Another common reference is the "swoop and poop" where one person swoops in and makes a huge mess. The sentiment is real, but for reasons you'll see in subsequent chapters, I'm a big fan of staying positive and believing the best about these folks. Comparing them to large, fat animals who crap all over our work is likely not the healthiest way to approach the relationship.

Communication Is the Job

The good news is that it doesn't have to be this way. It's possible to avoid the disruption and compromise that happens so frequently in organizational design through better communication with our stakeholders. I've found that the majority of issues or concerns that our stakeholders bring to our attention are often just a matter of misunderstanding or miscommunication. The way that we talk to them about our designs is the key to ensuring that we always end up with the best possible user experience.

It makes sense when you think about it. All human relationships are really nothing more than a series of understandings and *mis*understandings. We don't have control over how other people understand us. Everyone brings their past experiences into our conversations on a daily basis. We do, however, have control over how we communicate with them in an attempt to influence those understandings. The way that we talk to people and the things we say will have a huge impact on their response.



I know you were told your job was to design stuff, but it's not. Communication is the job!

GOOD COMMUNICATORS WIN

Overall, being a better communicator will give you more opportunities. As a design leader, the most common feedback I hear about my own team has more to do with the way they set expectations, follow up, and manage the relationships in the organization. When I am coaching people or helping them create a path for promotion, it almost never involves their design skill. Instead, it's usually about how they can increase their influence and impact across teams.

In that way, your career will improve if you're a good communicator. In fact, that may be all it takes to set yourself apart from other designers—even designers who might be more talented than you. Very simply: good communicators win.

Being Articulate Means Success

It's more than just using words, though. We have to turn those words into something that will enact change or compel people to support our decisions. We have to explain why we did what we did in a way that is compelling and convincing. It's about being articulate.

The key to being articulate is to understand both the message you want to communicate and the response you want in return. If you can learn to craft your messages in such a way that they yield the desired response, you'll find that you're much more successful at getting support for your decisions.

THE BEST IDEAS (DON'T ALWAYS) WIN

It might seem like the best ideas should always win or that great design should speak for itself, but that's not usually how it goes. Unfortunately, the best ideas get stuffed into a series of meetings where competing needs

vie for attention. The person who can convince others of their thinking is the one who gets their way. Your design solution might be amazing, but an assertive and well-spoken colleague is more likely to get support if they can convince the boss that they're right.

Designers lacking the ability to explain why they did what they did end up on the losing side of the argument, forced to make changes they disagree with simply because they were unable to fend them off. This is not to say that the stakeholder relationship is adversarial. In fact, these discussions can *feel* like good, solid teamwork. But the inability to speak up and articulate your side will often land you in the position of making changes that won't yield the best results.

Alternately, being articulate communicates several important things:

Imparts intelligence
: You're smart, you know what you're talking about, you have expertise in this area, and you can be trusted with the solution.

Demonstrates intentionality
: You've thought about it, pursued it, and are logical in your approach. This isn't just a random idea; there is purpose and focus.

Expresses confidence
: You know what needs to be done and how to make it happen. Having a solid argument shows conviction and clarity.

Shows respect
: You value people's input and time enough that you're well prepared. You're not wasting time or disregarding others.

Given these, our job is to articulate our decisions in a way that explains our reasoning while framing it in a way that appeals to the needs and expectations of our stakeholders. When those two things come together, we build trust—showing our expertise through both what we say and how we say it. We need to become articulate designers.

In the next chapter, we're going to answer a deceptively simple question: what makes a design successful? At first glance, it seems obvious. Solve the problem. Make it work for users. Done. But if you've been in this field

for any amount of time, you already know that's not how it plays out.

Designs don't succeed or fail in isolation. They succeed or fail in conversations, in meetings, and in the way we explain them to other people. Which means being right isn't enough. And that's exactly why we need to become better at something most designers were never taught: to match our design instincts with equally strong communication skills.

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1 The surest sign that a meeting is important is when it requires several other meetings to prepare for it.

[2]

Becoming a Great Designer

Let's talk about what makes a design successful, because that will form the basis for how we communicate about it. Remember the question I ask in interviews: *What makes a good design good?* There are many different ways we could answer this, but when it comes to creating the user experience, a design is really only good if it solves a problem. Usually, we are trying to solve problems for the business by accomplishing a goal or improving a metric. But, if we're also practicing user-centered design, we must make our designs effective for the people who will use them. These two ideas are deeply connected. Solving the problem is the outcome we're after. Being effective for users is one of the primary ways we achieve it. Most people in the design industry understand this is a core part of our jobs.

However, one thing that we often forget in the process is that there are other people involved who have influence over our project. It's not enough to simply solve the problem for the business and users; we have to get the support of other people in the organization in order to move forward. So, if we take that into account, there are really three things that every design needs to be successful:

- It solves a problem.
- It's effective for users.

- It’s supported by everyone.

Given this, the difference between a good designer and a great designer is the ability to not only solve the problem but also to articulate how the design solves it in a way that is compelling and earns support. If you can do that, you’re a great designer!
Let’s look at each one in more detail.

Solves a Problem

Of all the things we’re trying to accomplish with our work, we have to solve problems: business goals, engagement, conversion, interaction, feedback…. Whatever the problem is, our job is to find a solution and measure its success. We will know we’ve done a good job by looking at the impact our decisions had on the problem we set out to solve.
Ideally, you and your team already have goals, objectives, and key results (OKRs), or key performance indicators (KPIs). At a minimum, you need a well-formed problem statement that you can work from. If not, create them yourself or work with stakeholders to define them. Without a measuring stick, everything becomes opinion, and that’s where projects stall. You need something concrete to point to if you want to move forward. So figure out what matters most—impressions, conversions, sign-ups—pick one or two measurable areas to improve, and write them down. Use those goals to guide your work and anchor your conversations.

THE AWARENESS GAP

While we’re certainly skilled at approaching these problems to find creative solutions, we’re not always in tune with our own thought processes to help others understand why we did what we did. It is difficult to know why we made certain design decisions because a lot of our thinking is the output from years of experience and education. I’ve caught myself staring at a design I created and thinking, “I know this is right, but why did I do it this way?”
Some will call it intuition, but I’m convinced that good intuition is mainly a reflection of our past experience. Because of this, we may not be consciously aware of why we did what we did.
This is even more pronounced when using AI-generated designs. Just like our own experience-driven intuition, AI decision making is based on

pattern recognition from training data. You might have to ask the AI to justify and explain its decisions the same way a stakeholder would expect of us. In either case, the practice of solving problems with design must also be accompanied by an awareness that helps us explain our decisions to others.

Therefore, when you're working on a design, you need to make yourself consciously aware of every decision and why it matters—even if you're using AI. You need to be constantly asking yourself, *"What problem am I trying to solve with this?"* We will cover some common ways for framing problem statements in upcoming chapters, but for now your immediate task is simply to remain aware of the changes you're making. These unconscious choices hold the key to explaining your designs to others and ensuring that your expert perspective remains at the center of the final decision process.

DOCUMENTING YOUR THOUGHT PROCESS

The best approach is to write it down. There is something about moving your unconscious thought to a more tangible form that makes it easier to understand. Do whatever you need to do to document your own thought process.

Since you have measurable problems you're trying to solve, you can write down the problem and then list your solutions next to it. I personally use a notes app, while others prefer the tactile experience of handwriting in a journal. You can even use AI to evaluate your design and help you uncover your own thinking. The method you use for writing down your thinking doesn't matter. The point is to get you thinking about your decisions in concrete ways.

EXAMPLES OF PROBLEM-BASED SOLUTIONS

Here are a few examples of how I document solutions based on specific user problems:

PROBLEM	PROPOSED SOLUTION

PROBLEM	PROPOSED SOLUTION
Users don’t realize the filter controls have updated the list of results because it’s instantaneous.	• Move the count of items in the list closer to the filters so that the user can see the number change. • Briefly show a loading spinner on each checkbox as the user selects it. • Add a Done button that closes the panel to give the user a sense of completing the task.
Users do not proceed to the next steps from the marketing landing page.	• Move the headline and hero image to the left to make space for the call to action (CTA) on the right. • Change the color of the CTA to red; update the copy. • Remove background image, too distracting. • Position the “Next steps” list so that it will usually overlap on the fold, causing the user to want to scroll to the second CTA.

PROBLEM	PROPOSED SOLUTION
Users are not adding to their carts from the “search results” list view.	Reduce the number of actions required to add an item to the cart from search. One-tap add: • Tapping “Add to cart” will auto-add the item to the cart first without requiring a quantity or other information • On tap, the button changes to a quantity with an initial value of 1. User can increment quantity as needed. • Remove secondary “Add to cart” confirmation button. • New messaging animates to indicate that the item was added. • “Ready to Checkout?” call to action slides in underneath messaging. • Items with options, such as color or size, will automatically select a default but provide the user with the option to change it within view.

DESCRIBING DESIGN IN WORDS

One method I’ve found valuable is to try to describe my design work using only words. Since our end goal is to explain it anyway, why not attempt to describe it in sentence form? How would you describe your designs to someone verbally? What prompt would you use to get an AI to reproduce the same design? And if you did use generative AI to help you with the design to begin with, don’t toss out that prompt history. It is often a valuable source of your thinking that you can use.

Putting your work into words like this will reveal many of your motivations, some of which you never realized were there. The purpose is to articulate your decisions first to yourself so you’re better prepared to explain them to stakeholders later.

Here’s an example from one of my projects:

> The goal of this view is to help users quickly find the country report they’re looking for without having to open several reports first. I sorted the list alphabetically by country because country is the thing users are most likely to know when they arrive

here, but I kept the standard sort control in the top right for people who want to browse another way.

Each row is large enough to be an easy touch target on mobile. I put the country flag on the left because I expect it will help users visually scan the list faster than reading every country name. The country name is still the most important piece of information, so it's bold and prominent, with the report title underneath in smaller gray text.

On the right, I included a small preview of the currently selected metric—34 percent for infection rate, for example—so users can get useful information without opening the report. That also gives them another clue about whether this is the report they're looking for. Finally, the disclosure arrow signals that tapping the row will reveal more detail.

Together, these choices should let someone scan by flag or country name, get just enough information to know whether a report is relevant, and only open it when they need more detail.

LEVERAGING AI FOR INTERNAL CLARITY

This process doesn't need to be lengthy or time-consuming. In fact, this is a great task for AI, which can help you clarify and validate your thinking much faster. I've had success giving my designs to a chatbot, briefly explaining my goals, and then asking it to help me walk through the design principles I've used and how they connect with the goals. I'm often surprised at some of the connections it's able to make, which help me develop a more thorough understanding of my own thought process and identify gaps in my thinking I need to address.

Other times, I use these notes as a prompt to help AI generate design solutions. By doing this, I start with a well-articulated understanding of the problems to guide my designs, rather than the other way around. Plus, it keeps my own thinking and approach more focused on having a mature understanding of the problem rather than going straight to designed solutions, which is the ideal order of operations anyway.

You don't need to share these notes with your stakeholder. In fact, you probably shouldn't. At this stage, it's more about being intentional than it is about communicating with others. The takeaway here is that the process of writing about what you create will help your brain to connect the dots between the problem you're working on and how your designs solve it.

Whether you do it yourself or ask AI for help, the goal is to find a way to turn your thought process into something tangible—to uncover the words that will help you to explain yourself to other people in a way that makes sense.

Effective for Users

OK, so you know what problem you're solving. Now comes the harder question: what does any of this actually do for the user? If we're taking a user-centered design approach, we have to create something that is effective for users. While we know that usability is the core challenge with design, it can be difficult to explain that to other people.

Just as you were solving problems and becoming aware of each design decision, you must also do the same thing here. At every step of the process, for every decision, ask yourself, *"How does this affect the user?"* The trick to answering this question is that often we simply don't know how our decisions will affect our users. We can only make our best guess, try it out, and then draw conclusions from what we observe. You may be able to make good guesses using an AI-enabled repository that has access to your existing research or data.

Whatever the approach, just like the previous section, write it down. You need to be able to answer this question first to yourself so that you're prepared to give that answer to stakeholders—even if it's based on assumptions that still need to be validated.

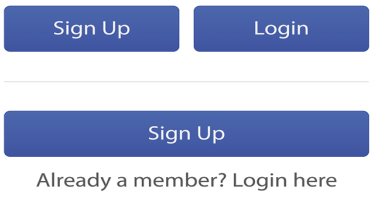
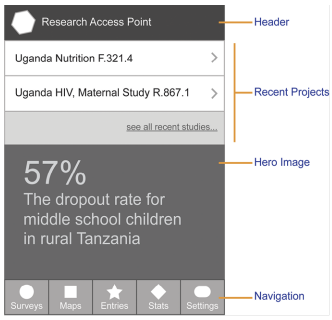
One way I capture how my designs affect users is by writing a story, either based on a user session I observed or loosely based on the overall use case. Here are some examples:

Simplified, usability is about two things: common sense and research. Early in a project, you won't have perfect data or complete user insights. You really have no choice but to make your best guess about what will work for the user. You make an informed decision with what you have—drawing on experience, patterns, and what seems to make the most sense. Then you move forward.

Of course, what feels obvious isn't always what users actually do. That's where research comes in. Whether it's analytics or direct observation, the goal is to validate (or challenge) your assumptions. Analytics can show you what happened, but not always why. For that, you need to watch real

people interact with your work. That's the only way to actually know how your decisions affect users.

So start with your best thinking and then test it. The combination of the two not only improves the outcome, but it also gives you something solid to stand on when explaining your decisions.

DESIGN CHANGES	HOW IT AFFECTS THE USER
	Having two similar buttons for Login and Sign Up next to each other is confusing to some users. We've observed users hesitate when deciding which button they should choose because the buttons are so similar. Because Sign Up is the most common case in this context, I've made that button the full width of the container and changed the Login button to a text link. This should make it easier for new users to sign up while still facilitating easy login for existing users. Most existing users will go directly to their account page by being automatically logged in. This should reduce confusion and increase conversion.
	When researchers are in the field, they need quick access to their data without having to navigate through the app. So, rather than keep the hero image at the top of the home screen, we're moving it down in favor of a "Recent Projects" list at the top. Users can still see this important information, but their reports are more easily available to them because that's their primary use of the app after they've already accessed the projects.

Supported by Everyone

By now, we know it's not enough to only solve problems and make our designs effective to use, because if our stakeholders don't support us, we aren't going to get anywhere at all. You could have the most innovative

design in the world, but if no one on your team understands what you're trying to do, you're not going to be able to move forward.

There's a lot at stake. If you don't get support, you'll constantly rehash the same conversations over and over again. When people don't remember why you did what you did, they'll bring it up again at the next meeting. When they aren't convinced, they'll continue to suggest alternatives. The scope increases, a vibe-coded prototype becomes the new standard, and you're bogged down in meeting requests to review the changes. In the end, you might have to ship a product with a compromised user experience, all because you couldn't get stakeholders on board with your solution.

Getting the support of everyone on your team is the primary focus of this book. We aren't going to be able to get anywhere unless we're able to get everyone on the same page and agree to move in the right direction. That's what getting support is all about: creating enough understanding and trust that we can move forward together. You need to create an environment where everyone understands what you're doing, believes in your expertise, and supports your choices so that you can move on to the next thing.

AN ASPIRATIONAL GOAL

I suspect that you might wince a little by the idea that we need support from *everyone*—and rightly so. Indeed, this is deliberately aspirational, and exactly who we mean by "everyone" will vary from organization to organization. My purpose in using such a broad term is to remind us not to sell ourselves short when it comes to getting support.

It would be easy to focus only on the people who matter most: those who can approve (or reject) our work. In fact, we should be working to get much broader support than that. You may not need approval from the developer on your team, but if they understand what you're doing and support you, the implementation will go so much more smoothly. You'll get fewer questions, less pushback, and lots of positive feedback. The more people who support you, the greater the impact of your work. When you frame the core of your job as getting support from everyone, it changes how you approach your daily work and improves your ability to get things done.

SUPPORT VERSUS APPROVAL

I'm also intentional about using the word *support*, rather than, say, approval or agreement. We will not get everyone to agree on a specific solution. Approval isn't the point either because it implies a certain amount of consensus. That's OK because that's not what we're looking for. We're looking for their support—of us, our expertise, our solution, or our plan for moving forward. It's possible to get stakeholder support even if they disagree with the solution. In that way, what we're looking for is *agreement to move forward*, not agreement on the solution. Forward momentum is the goal, not consensus. We need their support to do that.

THE POWER OF ALTERNATIVES

To get the support we need, we have to understand our designs by asking ourselves, *"Why is this better than the alternative?"* Implicit in this question is that we know what the alternatives are, we've considered them or even tried them, and we're prepared to explain why our solution is better.

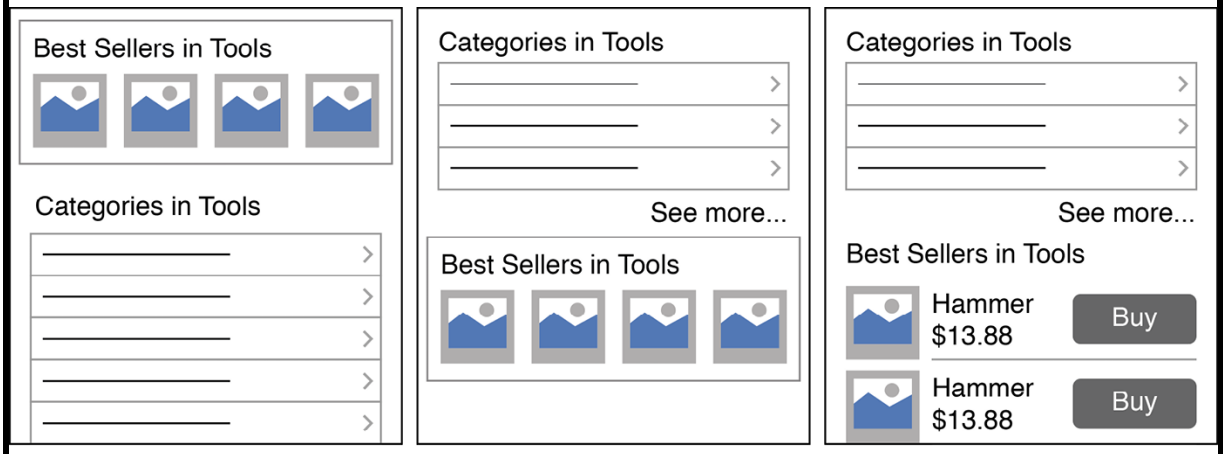
For each design we create, there is an alternate, often opposing, way of solving the same problem. This is the reason why we have disagreements about the solutions to begin with and a key problem with articulating design decisions. Designers can be really good at coming up with a solution for the problem, but we're less adept at understanding *all* of the solutions to the problem. We can become so myopic when we think we've found it. Designers are remarkably good at falling in love with the solution they just spent three days creating.

Often, though, we are aware of other alternatives. We probably tried them, moved stuff around, and eventually landed on the solution we believe is best. But it's all those little movements that we failed to make ourselves consciously aware of, and so we're less prepared to help other people understand our thought process. Likewise, we often know what our peers and colleagues will suggest. If you've worked with your stakeholders before, you can make a pretty good guess about how they'll react. Yet if you can guess how they'll react but you fail to consider those alternatives and understand why your solution is better, you will have a difficult time building support for your recommendation.

The takeaway is this: be consciously aware of why your design decisions are better than the alternatives. Just like the previous two questions, write

down your answers. Make a list of the other ways that you could solve this problem. Create alternative designs and have them available. With those alternatives, make a short list of why you think they don't solve the problem as well as your proposed design. Thinking critically about these other options will help you to be prepared to discuss your decisions with other people.

Sometimes, I create very simple wireframes of the alternatives in addition to my recommendation. When people begin asking questions about my proposed solution, I can quickly show these to visually demonstrate the differences. Even in a world where it's easy to make everything hi-fi, I still find that wireframes are an effective way to keep the conversation focused on what really matters.



Very simple wireframes can make it easier to discuss alternatives without taking too much time.

Making It Happen

If we're going to be successful at communicating with people about our designs, we must be able to answer these three questions about our work:

1. What problem does it solve?
2. How does it affect the user?
3. Why is it better than the alternative?

Answering these questions is more of an exercise in helping you to understand your choices than it is a prescriptive method for documenting them. Don't worry too much about the details of how you write them down. If you can answer these three questions, you'll be well on your way to explaining your decisions to the people who have influence over your project. These answers will form the basis of how you respond to stakeholder concerns about your designs.

Ultimately, your ability to be thoughtful about a problem and articulate *any* solution is more important than your ability to design the perfect solution every time. When other people realize that you've put thought into it and are being intentional, they're more willing to trust you, even if they disagree. An articulate designer can describe and express their designs in a way that makes sense to those other people.

In that way, becoming a great designer is just as much about communication skills as it is about design chops. Using these questions as your guide, you can find better ways to explain your design decisions, help others understand your perspective, and ensure the best experience for your users.

Knowing what makes a design successful is important. The harder challenge is making those decisions consistently across teams, products, and organizations. Because good design is not the result of a single decision. It's the result of hundreds of small decisions made over time. And if we want to explain those decisions to other people, we first need a way to evaluate them ourselves. We need a way to make good design decisions that is repeatable, shared, and easy to defend. In the next chapter, we will look at what we need to create a solid decision-making framework.

[3]

A Decision-Making Framework

So far, we've been talking about whether a design is "good" in fairly broad terms. If it solves the problem, helps users accomplish their goals, and improves on the alternatives, then we can probably consider it successful. That's true, but in practice design work is much more nuanced than that because products are not made from single decisions.

A good design is really a *collection* of good design decisions. Spacing, hierarchy, terminology, interaction patterns, accessibility, business constraints, and countless other choices all combine into the final user experience. What we present to stakeholders is rarely a single "design." It's a collection of decisions that can be surprisingly difficult to explain clearly. That means good design does not happen accidentally. In order to make decisions you can defend and explain consistently, you need a method for how those decisions are made in the first place. You need principles that help guide your thinking, guidelines that create consistency, and standards that help teams evaluate quality together.

The goal of this chapter is to help you build a system for making intentional design decisions. A system that helps everyone communicate more clearly, critique work more effectively, align stakeholders, and maintain consistency across products and people. And increasingly, as AI becomes part of the design process, these systems also become the foundation for evaluating and improving AI-generated work as well. But

first, we need to understand why making consistent decisions is so incredibly difficult in the first place.

Making Good Design Decisions

One of the hardest challenges in organizational design is that different designers can make very different decisions while still arriving at solutions that are reasonable and effective. Even within the same team, people solving similar problems may unintentionally make different decisions about patterns, terminology, hierarchy, or interactions, creating inconsistency across the experience.

And then, of course, there's taste. Design is not purely functional. Craft, polish, and attention to detail all matter too. A product can technically solve the problem and still feel poorly designed because the decisions behind it lack cohesion, intentionality, or refinement.

So how do we make good design decisions consistently across products, people, and teams? More importantly, how do we explain and defend those decisions when different people have different instincts, preferences, and opinions?

Over the years, I've come to believe that strong design decisions have three things in common: they're intentional, they're agreed upon, and they're consistent.

GOOD DESIGN DECISIONS ARE INTENTIONAL

Nothing should be accidental. Every interaction, layout choice, transition, color, hierarchy decision, or flow should have some reason behind it. When we can explain *why* a decision was made, it becomes defensible instead of purely subjective.

Of course, many of our decisions already *feel* intentional. Experienced designers rely heavily on instinct built from years of pattern recognition and exposure to real products. But I've also learned that many decisions quietly fall into the category of "this just felt right to me." Sometimes those instincts are correct. Sometimes they aren't. Either way, it becomes difficult to justify the decision clearly when challenged if the reasoning only exists as intuition.

GOOD DESIGN DECISIONS ARE AGREED UPON

Product design is inherently collaborative. If a decision only makes sense to one designer, it becomes difficult to scale and maintain over time. At

some point, design teams need to align around how certain problems should be solved.

When two different approaches could both reasonably work, the team still needs to choose one. That choice becomes part of the organization's shared understanding of how decisions should be made moving forward. Not because everyone personally prefers it, but because consistency and alignment help the product evolve coherently over time.

GOOD DESIGN DECISIONS ARE CONSISTENT

Similar problems should generally be solved in similar ways. Consistency helps users build confidence and familiarity with the system. When decisions become inconsistent across features, users are forced to stop, reinterpret, and relearn how things work.

In many cases, software that feels poorly designed is actually just inconsistent in the decisions behind it. For example, if a similar interaction opens a modal in one part of the application but a side panel in another, the issue isn't that either pattern is wrong. It's that similar problems are being solved in different ways, making the product feel inconsistent and less thoughtfully designed.

Building a Decision-Making Framework

All of this implies something important: we need an agreed-upon way to evaluate design decisions. A system that helps us determine why one choice is stronger than another, how to explain those decisions clearly, and how to make similar decisions consistently over time. This decision-making framework can be used in design reviews, stakeholder meetings, and when evaluating AI-generated designs.

That framework does not need to be overly formal or complicated. In fact, the word framework sounds much more daunting than it is. Sometimes it's nothing more than a shared checklist, a set of guidelines, or a handful of agreed-upon standards that help us evaluate decisions more consistently.

This kind of framework gives us a shared foundation for making decisions, helps us move beyond personal preference, and evaluates our work against agreed-upon standards. It can help us explain *why* decisions were made in the first place.

Using Existing Design Principles

The good news is that you do not need to invent all of this from scratch. There are already decades of established design thinking available to you. Human–computer interaction (HCI) research, usability heuristics, accessibility standards, platform conventions, cognitive psychology, and interaction design principles all provide strong foundations for evaluating interfaces.

Nielsen Norman Group's usability heuristics are one of the most widely referenced, building on decades of HCI research alongside many other influential models and methodologies. Some of the heuristics include:

- Visibility of system status
- User control and freedom
- Consistency and standards
- Recognition over recall
- Flexibility and efficiency of use[1]

Similarly, accessibility standards are not simply compliance checklists. They are principles about inclusivity, perception, clarity, and usability under real-world constraints. Many accessibility improvements make interfaces better for everyone, not just users with permanent disabilities. The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) guidelines in the *POUR* framework[2] (Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, and Robust) offer practical guidance for evaluating accessibility throughout the design process.

Platform conventions, too, matter for similar reasons. Users already carry mental models from operating systems, browsers, apps, and tools they've used before. Reinventing interaction patterns without a strong reason often creates unnecessary friction. Apple's *Human Interface Guidelines*[3] continue to inspire and guide designers for evaluating interaction patterns against widely understood user expectations.

That's not to say all products should look identical. But it does mean that good design decisions usually begin with understanding why existing patterns evolved in the first place. It can be incredibly valuable to leverage these existing tools to help us make good design decisions.

Creating Your Own Framework

Beyond using existing frameworks, I've found it most valuable to create a tailored set of principles directly related to my own product, users, and organizational needs. Often this happens naturally over time. Teams start with established heuristics and best practices but eventually begin noticing recurring patterns in their own decision making. Verbal agreements slowly become habits, and those habits eventually need to be written down. You'll know you've found one when you hear yourself saying the same thing in the third design critique that week.

That's why mature design teams begin codifying these ideas into documentation. Not to create bureaucracy or turn design into rigid checklists but to create shared understanding about how decisions are made and what quality looks like across the organization.

The word "principles" gets used in a lot of different ways. I've never been on a team that used it the same way, so I've centered on thinking about it at three different levels: *principles*, *guidelines*, and *standards*. They start broad and gradually become more specific, moving from general philosophy toward concrete rules:

Principles answer: How should we think about design?

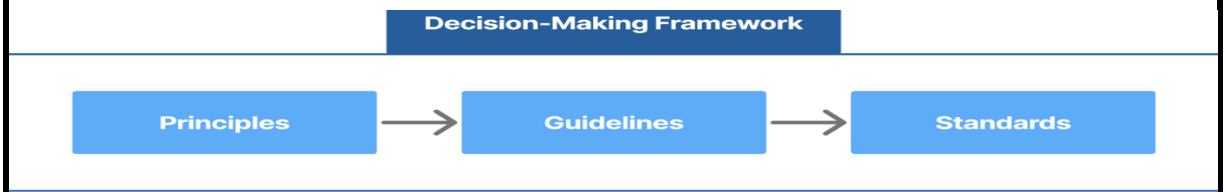
Broad, higher-level design values that don't reference specific interface elements. These guide our thinking when designing.

Guidelines answer: What do we usually do?

Goes one level deeper, touching on larger interface elements by describing the boundaries that we typically work within.

Standards answer: What do we enforce?

Defines the decisions that must remain consistent across the product. These are often embedded directly into the design system.



A decision-making framework including principles, guidelines, and standards can help us make better decisions.

Each level becomes slightly more specific and tactical. Principles guide decision making. Guidelines establish recurring patterns and expectations. Standards define consistency and enforcement. Together, they form a framework we can use to both evaluate our design decisions and also justify them to stakeholders in the business. To see how this works in practice, let's look at how to build and apply each layer, starting with principles.

Principles: Defining How We Think

Principles are the broadest layer of the framework. They are less about specific interface decisions and more about how we think when approaching problems. As the highest level of thinking, principles can be surprisingly difficult to do well. Many organizations create vague, inspirational principles that sound good in presentations but become almost useless during real design discussions:

- "Delight the user."
- "Be innovative."
- "Keep it simple."

These statements are not necessarily wrong, but they are too broad to help us make difficult tradeoff decisions. Almost everyone already believes they are designing something simple or delightful.
Useful principles are actionable. They help us evaluate decisions consistently. For example:

- "Keep users in context."
- "Default to consistency, diverge with intent."
- "Make it scalable and future proof."
- "Upfront accessibility is cheap."
- "Make the system state explicit."

These are much more useful because they can directly influence decision making. The goal is not to eliminate judgment entirely. Good design will

always involve nuance and tradeoffs. Strong principles simply provide a shared understanding that helps us make better decisions more consistently.

WRITING EFFECTIVE PRINCIPLES

When creating principles, I usually encourage design teams to begin by asking a simpler question: *What does good decision making actually look like for our product today?*

- What frustrates users today?
- What behaviors are we encouraging?
- What kinds of mistakes are costly?
- Where do users lose confidence?
- What tradeoffs matter most?

Different products naturally prioritize different things. A workflow built for expert users may value density and efficiency, while a consumer onboarding flow may prioritize simplicity and guidance. Principles should emerge from the real needs, constraints, and goals of the product itself.

REINFORCING WEAK AREAS

I've also found that principles are most effective when they reinforce areas where the team tends to struggle or lose consistency. In other words, principles are often most valuable where the team needs reminders, alignment, or clearer guidance. If a team already has strong instincts and shared habits in a particular area, there may not be much value in formalizing it as a principle.

For example, some teams naturally think "mobile first" because it has already become deeply embedded in how they work. In that situation, writing a formal principle around using a mobile-first approach may not actually change behavior.

The best principles highlight the areas where teams repeatedly debate decisions, drift into inconsistency, overlook important user needs, or struggle to maintain quality over time. Those weak points are usually the places where clearer principles can have the biggest impact.

Guidelines: Identifying Common Patterns

If principles describe how we think, guidelines describe how we typically apply those ideas in practice. Guidelines are recurring patterns, defaults, and recommendations that help us make decisions more efficiently without needing to debate foundational choices repeatedly.
For example:

- Overlays triggered by click interactions should include explicit close controls.
- Navigation should remain visually stable between views.
- Primary actions should occupy consistent locations.
- Hover interactions should not gate essential functionality.
- Interfaces should remain usable without relying on color alone.

Unlike principles, guidelines reference actual interface behavior and implementation patterns more directly.
Guidelines are not rigid laws. Exceptions do exist. But they create consistency by establishing shared expectations for how common situations are usually handled across the user experience.

DEFINING PRACTICAL GUIDELINES

One of the easiest ways to identify guidelines is to pay attention to repeated conversations happening during critiques, reviews, or implementation discussions. If the same decisions continue appearing over and over, that's often a sign that it needs a documented guideline.
For example:

- How do we handle destructive actions?
- When should modals be used?
- Where do primary actions appear?
- How should validation behave?

Guidelines answer these questions proactively, reducing ambiguity, improving consistency, and helping teams make decisions faster.

BETTER CRITIQUES THROUGH GUIDELINES

One of the places guidelines become most valuable is during design reviews and critiques. Over time, design teams begin to internalize them and naturally use the language during conversations about the work. Some of my favorite moments are when designers start repeating these ideas almost like mantras during critiques, referencing them so often that they become part of the team's natural vocabulary.

This changes the dynamic of feedback significantly. Instead of critiques revolving around personal preference, the conversation becomes grounded in shared, agreed-upon definitions of good decision making. Designers are no longer defending their work against someone else's opinion. They're evaluating it together against the same framework.

Standards: Documenting What We Enforce

Standards are the most specific and enforceable layer of the framework. If principles shape thinking and guidelines shape recurring patterns, standards define the decisions that should remain consistent across the product no matter who is designing or building it. At this level, it's no longer broad philosophy. Standards are for operationalizing consistency.

DOCUMENTING ENFORCEABLE STANDARDS

One useful way to identify standards is to look for areas where inconsistency creates the most risk. Accessibility is a good example. Allowing every designer or engineer to interpret accessibility differently usually creates unreliable experiences. The same is true for spacing systems, component behavior, or interaction states. These decisions benefit from consistency and enforcement.

Standards are especially useful because they remove unnecessary decision making from everyday work. Teams no longer need to debate things that should already be solved systematically. There are better ways to spend a design critique than having the same argument about where the primary button goes for the seventeenth time.

In many organizations, standards eventually become embedded directly into design systems and component libraries. At that point, good decisions become easier by default because the system itself reinforces consistency.

AVOIDING TOO MUCH OVERHEAD

Unlike principles, standards function more like rules or constraints that reduce inconsistency and unnecessary debate. But standards also come

with maintenance cost, so we need to be thoughtful about what actually deserves to be codified. The goal is reducing avoidable inconsistency so we can spend more time solving meaningful user problems instead of repeatedly debating foundational implementation details.

EXAMPLE DESIGN STANDARDS

Here are three examples to help you see how standards follow from principles and guidelines, creating a complete decision-making framework from broad ideas down to enforceable rules:

Modal Dialog Behavior

- Modal width must not exceed 720px.
- A modal may contain only one primary task.
- Closing the modal with Esc, clicking the Close button, or clicking outside the dialog must produce the same result unless the action is destructive.
- Modals may not contain nested navigation or open additional dialogs.

Primary Action Placement

- Every view must contain only one primary action.
- The primary action must use the designated primary button component.
- Primary actions appear in the bottom right of dialogs and the upper right of application pages.
- Destructive actions may never be styled as the primary action.

Empty States

Every empty state must include:

- A title
- A brief explanation

- One recommended next action
- An illustration (optional)
- No more than 75 words of body copy



You can find more examples of design principles, guidelines, and standards on my website at http://tomgreever.com/resources.

Operationalizing Design Judgment

The goal of having this system is to enable design decision making across the organization. Principles, guidelines, and standards become most valuable when they move beyond discussion and become embedded into our process and design discussions. Otherwise, they slowly drift into forgotten documentation that no one references again.

TURNING PRINCIPLES INTO DECISIONS

Once you have the system, it becomes a tool for justifying design decisions during critiques and stakeholder conversations.

Instead of:

> "I think this feels cleaner."

The conversation becomes:

> "We chose a side panel because one of our principles is to keep users in context. This lets them continue referencing the information they're already working with."

Or:

> "Rather than interrupt users with another dialog, we followed our principle of preferring reversible actions and provided an Undo option instead."

Conversations become grounded in shared ideals instead of personal preference. This is one of the most important shifts you can make. You are no longer debating opinions. You are evaluating tradeoffs against agreed-upon principles. That doesn't eliminate disagreement entirely, but it changes the nature of the conversation dramatically. And while this

approach improves internal design critiques, its true superpower is how it changes your conversations outside the design team, specifically with your stakeholders.

USING PRINCIPLES WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Using design principles and guidelines with stakeholders can be incredibly effective, but it really depends on how people think about decision making. Some leaders naturally gravitate toward systems, patterns, and frameworks. Often these are people with engineering backgrounds or more analytical ways of thinking. They appreciate consistency, logic, and agreed-upon standards. In those situations, principles and guidelines can become a powerful communication tool because they shift conversations away from personal opinion and toward shared reasoning.

I once had an executive review one of our design guidelines and say, "That's something I've noticed over and over in the product, but I never had the words for it before." What he appreciated most wasn't the rule itself. It was having a shared vocabulary for discussing design decisions more clearly.

But not every stakeholder approaches design feedback that way. Some people are much more instinctive and conversational. They want to react to what they see, suggest changes in the moment, and influence the process more directly. In those cases, part of our job is to interpret their feedback through the lens of our principles and guidelines, grounding the conversation in shared reasoning rather than personal preference.

Even when stakeholders are not explicitly referencing the framework themselves, the principles still help center the design team around shared thinking. They create a defensible foundation for decisions, reduce purely subjective debates, and give the team a common language for discussing tradeoffs. That alone can dramatically improve the quality of conversations and make it easier to build support over time.

INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE

One of the biggest advantages of documented principles is that they preserve organizational knowledge. We will explore this more in Chapter 11, but when the reasoning behind decisions is documented, future designers gain access not only to the final design but to the thinking behind it. This becomes even more important in larger organizations where teams

change frequently. Documenting decisions helps organizations scale judgment.

FEEDBACK LOOPS

It's also important to remember that principles are not permanent truth. They should evolve. As products grow, research improves, technologies change, and users behave differently, we should revisit and refine our frameworks. A decision-making framework is a living system, not a rulebook. It should evolve to preserve consistency, clarity, and intentionality as the product changes.

AI Changed the Stakes

All this work of defining principles, guidelines, and standards has become even more important in the age of AI. The difficult part is no longer creating more options but evaluating which option is actually better. Without a solid understanding of design principles, it becomes much harder to make sound judgment calls, especially when evaluating work that may have been partially or fully AI-generated.

Documented principles, guidelines, and standards give us a shared way to evaluate that work, explain our decisions, and make better choices together—no matter where the design came from.

AI-ASSISTED EVALUATION

Well-documented principles also unlock entirely new possibilities for AI-assisted design critiques. You can connect AI systems directly to internal documentation, provide a design file or prototype, and generate feedback based on your team's own standards. In effect, AI becomes the first design review: identifying heuristic violations, accessibility issues, design system inconsistencies, and other opportunities for improvement before the work is ever shared with your team or stakeholders. Some design teams are already building AI-assisted critique systems that automatically review designs against their own documented standards.

The better documented your design principles and standards, the easier it becomes to use AI as a meaningful collaborator instead of just a generator.

DESIGNERS ARE DECISION MAKERS

Because of AI, designers are increasingly becoming less like pure interface creators and more like auditors, evaluators, and creative directors of AI

output. It's exposing weak reasoning and separating surface-level output from real, human design judgment.

The designers who continue to thrive will be the people who can explain why a certain design decision works and how that decision aligns with user needs, business goals, and broader design principles, even when a machine helped generate the solution.

AI hasn't fundamentally changed the role of designers. It has simply shifted more of our value from creating interfaces to evaluating decisions. The real challenge has never been producing screens. It's been making good decisions, explaining them clearly, and helping teams align around them.

Ultimately, the value of design has always been the judgment behind the decisions, and a well-documented decision-making framework helps teams make those decisions with greater consistency, clarity, and confidence.

Now that we have a framework for making good design decisions, we need the skills to communicate them effectively. Knowing why a decision is the right one and being able to explain it clearly in the moment are two very different things.

Being articulate isn't just about having the right answer or knowing what to say. It's about how you think, how you respond, and how you show up when it matters. And none of that comes down to a single skill. These are abilities that can be learned, practiced, and refined. In the next chapter, we'll look at the collection of skills that can help you become a more articulate designer.

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1 Jakob Nielson, 10 "Usability Heuristics for User Interface Design," NNGroup, *https://www.nngroup.com/articles/ten-usability-heuristics/*.

2 "Introduction to Understanding WCAG 2.2," World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), *https://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG22/Understanding/intro*.

3 "Human Interface Guidelines," Apple Developer, *https://developer.apple.com/design/human-interface-guidelines*.

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Skills for Being Articulate

Being articulate isn't a single skill. It's a collection of skills that shape how others experience your communication. The words you use matter, but they aren't the only thing people respond to. They respond to you: how you listen, how you think, how you react, and how you show up.

Before we get into the people and conversations around your work, I want to pause for a moment and look at those skills. This chapter is a little different from the others. Think of it less as a checklist and more as a collection of tools you can draw from. There isn't one right skillset for an articulate designer, and you certainly don't need to master everything here. Some of these skills may already come naturally to you. Others may be worth developing. A few may not feel especially relevant to you at all.

The good news is that most of these skills can be learned and improved with practice. People who seem naturally articulate have often just spent more time developing them through repeated situations where clear communication matters.

When I coach designers, these are the skills that come up most often and have a direct impact on how effectively they communicate. You'll see many of them referenced throughout the rest of this book. I'm not going to teach you how to master each one here. Entire books have been written about most of them, and I don't claim to be an expert in all of these areas. My goal is simply to show you why they matter to design work and help you recognize where you might want to improve.

So as you read through them, notice the ones you're already good at and the ones that could use some work. Pick one or two to practice. Come back to this chapter when you need it. What follows is a quick reference to the skills I've found most useful, from how we communicate and think to how we show up in our work.

Core Communication Skills

These skills help us express ideas clearly, structure our thinking, and communicate with confidence in both planned and spontaneous situations.

PUBLIC SPEAKING

It's usually pretty obvious how public speaking can help us be more articulate; it's often the first skill most people think of. While public speaking is frequently associated with prepared or memorized presentations, the underlying skills translate directly to "off-the-cuff" responses required when facing an assertive leader. Everything from calming nerves, stage presence, vocal regulation, and developing a logical flow all contribute to being a more effective communicator.

Delivery matters too. The same explanation can sound confident and engaging or uncertain and difficult to follow depending on your pace, tone, volume, and energy. You don't need to be charismatic or performative, but a flat or rushed delivery makes it harder for people to stay engaged with your reasoning. Learning to vary your pace, emphasize important points, and sound genuinely interested in what you're saying can make a noticeable difference.

I've given enough talks by now that standing on a stage feels fairly normal, but I still rehearse, still get nervous, and still notice when I'm rushing. To improve, look for local clubs and resources dedicated to practicing these skills. Toastmasters is an international organization just for this, but you can also volunteer to speak at your local UX meetup. Even leading a "lunch and learn" on a topic of interest at your company is a great opportunity to practice your public speaking skills.

WRITING

Good writing skills are the tangible equivalent to being verbally articulate. I've found that people who are good at speaking may be poor writers, and vice versa, but they're effectively the same skill in different forms. For me, speaking makes me a better writer, and writing makes me a better speaker.

Unfortunately, an overreliance on AI-writing tools has made a lot of us lazy with writing, to the point that our skills may have atrophied. Yes, AI tools are incredibly helpful at quickly getting to a written message, and I think we should take full advantage of these gains, but not at the expense of our own skills. So find some ways to improve your own writing, even while still getting the benefit of AI.

STORYTELLING

Everyone loves a good story. In some ways, articulating design decisions is all about storytelling. Keeping people engaged and telling the story of our decisions is absolutely what we are doing. While I won't go deep into storytelling frameworks here, the principles apply directly to our work. Using structures like the hero's journey, rising and falling action, or plot twists are great ways to bring others along in your work through storytelling. There are plenty of resources for learning to tell better stories, but I recommend Anna Dahlström's *Storytelling in Design*, since it is specifically tailored to designers.

Thinking Skills

Being articulate includes thinking clearly. These skills help us analyze situations, understand people, and respond more thoughtfully.

PSYCHOLOGY

Lots of us in UX already have a good understanding of human psychology, especially if you studied human factors. However, the real value lies in how we apply that understanding to our interactions with stakeholders. When you can recognize things like ego protection, confirmation bias, or power dynamics, it becomes easier to interpret a stakeholder's actions without taking them personally. Even if you studied psychology formally, it's beneficial to dust off that knowledge and apply it to your daily professional context. We aren't trying to label people but to find the most effective ways to react and respond in the moment. I find it incredibly useful to regularly refresh my memory of these most common concepts.

LOGIC AND CRITICAL THINKING

I'm referring to the practical side of logic: building sound arguments and communicating ideas clearly without falling into the common fallacies that show up in everyday conversations. Most of us haven't formally studied logic or critical thinking, and it's a gap in many education paths. You might

have encountered parts of it in debate, argumentation theory, or discussions around rational thinking. While the subject can get academic quickly, even a basic understanding of common fallacies is incredibly useful in a business setting. For example, when you can recognize that an executive's criticism of your user interface (UI) is a straw man argument, you're in a much better position to respond thoughtfully instead of reacting at face value. Mastering logical structures and critical thinking is a powerful, yet often underrated, skill for any designer.

Interaction Skills

Communication is a two-way process. These skills help us connect with others, build rapport, and navigate conversations more effectively.

LISTENING

Most people understand that listening is an important skill in both relationships and work. But because we communicate every day, it's easy to assume we're already good at it. While we'll explore listening more deeply within the context of design in Chapter 10, it's worth remembering that most of us have significant room for improvement. In fact, I suspect the majority of people overestimate how well they listen. Hearing and listening aren't the same. Adopting practices like active listening, reflecting, nondefensive listening, and asking clarifying questions can significantly improve how well we understand others. Ultimately, when you become a better listener, you become a better communicator too.

HUMOR

Humor is one of the most effective ways to connect with others, diffuse tension, and set the tone of a conversation, but it's not without risk. Self-deprecating humor can go too far and eventually undermine your credibility. Puns are funny at first but tend to wear out their welcome quickly. And jokes at someone else's expense are almost always a bad idea. You generally want to keep your jokes to more benign and shared experiences. ("What's the deal with Agile?")

Using humor well in a business context requires discernment and experience. But when it works, it's a powerful skill. There's more structure to it than most people realize, so it's worth paying attention to those who do it well or even studying the basic rules of comedy. I once had a

colleague who even practiced by performing at a local comedy club on open mic nights to hone this skill.

While some people are more naturally inclined toward humor than others, you don't need to be a comedian to benefit from it. Often, the real opportunity is simply not taking yourself too seriously. In many work environments, the bigger issue isn't a lack of humor but rather that everyone is too serious. So don't feel pressure to perform; instead look for moments to be relaxed, a little playful, and human. When you are, others tend to follow. Humor is just one of the easiest ways to get there.

BEING A GOOD CONVERSATIONALIST

Like listening, carrying a conversation is a skill many people assume they're good at simply because they do it every day. For others, it can feel like a real challenge, especially in small talk situations where coming up with topics feels awkward or forced. In both cases, there's value in learning how to lead engaging and useful conversations that help build stronger relationships. Being a good conversationalist isn't about telling that long, highly detailed story about your first speeding ticket. Instead, it's about showing genuine interest in others, sharing a bit of yourself, and keeping the interaction balanced and engaging.

Similar to humor, there's more structure to good conversation than most realize, and it's a skill that can be developed over time. At its core, conversation is an opportunity to reinforce something simple: the person you're talking to is human…and so are you. Finding the right balance of asking, listening, and sharing creates interactions people enjoy and want to return to. This will improve your engagement with others, and as a byproduct, build the trust and support necessary for your decisions.

Professional Leverage

These skills strengthen how others perceive your judgment, credibility, and ability to contribute beyond your immediate role.

EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

Executive presence is actually a broad category of many skills that corporate environments often bundle together to describe someone who can present themselves well in lots of different situations. At its core, executive presence is about how others perceive your judgment, confidence, and reliability. Being decisive, communicating confidence,

staying calm under pressure, quickly assessing situations, and forming a response: these are all marks of having good executive presence. On my teams, this is a frequent topic of discussion during hiring and promotion cycles; my leaders often ask, “Does this person have good executive presence?” Fortunately, there are leadership courses and specialized cohorts designed specifically to help professionals improve their executive presence.

PERSUASIVENESS

Persuasion sometimes elicits bad vibes for people because it conjures images of aggressive sales tactics or manipulation. If that’s your impression of this skill, I would encourage you to look deeper at its principles. In fact, being persuasive does not have to be manipulative at all. The main methods of persuasion involve understanding what your audience wants and finding a way to provide what they want, while also securing what you need. It’s a win-win. That’s exactly what we’re trying to achieve with articulating design decisions. There are many valuable lessons from persuasion techniques that we can apply in our work to build understanding and support without resorting to manipulation.

VOCABULARY

Expanding your vocabulary is both broad and an ongoing pursuit and one of the simplest ways to improve how clearly and effectively you communicate. What makes this especially useful is its accessibility. It doesn’t require a major time commitment or structured practice. Reading, word-of-the-day tools, and simply paying attention to language can all make a meaningful difference.

In our context, it’s particularly valuable to build vocabulary in the cross-functional disciplines you work with. The more familiar you are with the language of accounting and finance, marketing and branding, or product and business, the easier it becomes to have meaningful conversations and align on decisions. You don’t need to become an accountant. You just need to know enough that the accountants don’t have to translate everything for you.

One of the most impactful areas to focus on is technical vocabulary, especially computer science, data science, and machine learning (ML). You don’t need a formal degree, but being able to follow and participate in

these conversations significantly strengthens how you present your work. For example, understanding concepts like state and state machines in computer science has been incredibly useful in my own work with engineering teams. Framing design decisions using language your stakeholders already understand is one of the most effective ways to build alignment and earn support.

Technical Leverage

Understanding the tools, technologies, and systems around us helps us communicate more effectively and collaborate across disciplines.

CODING

The design industry has gone through cycles of debate over whether designers need to learn coding. Like any skill, learning something new expands your ability to contribute and adds to your overall value. I don't think designers need to become full-fledged engineers, but there's significant value in understanding the medium that brings our work to life. Early in my career, I learned how to write production-level HTML and CSS, and I've carried that knowledge with me ever since. It's incredibly helpful when collaborating with developers and understanding the capabilities and constraints of the technology our teams use.

More recently, I've noticed that designers with a basic understanding of frontend code are much more effective at leveraging AI tools. They can tweak and refine generated code directly, rather than relying entirely on prompts to get the right result. You don't need to learn everything, but any exposure to the language of technology will help you communicate your ideas more clearly and collaborate more effectively with the people building them.

PROMPTING AND LEVERAGING AI

As AI tools become more accessible and easier to use, knowing how to leverage them effectively is quickly becoming a core skill, especially when it comes to prompting. And in the context of generative design tools, it's increasingly important for designers to understand how these systems work and how to get the best results from them precisely because anyone can use them.

You may not be able to stop a product manager from vibe-coding their way to a minimum viable product (MVP), but you can develop your ability to

guide these tools in a way that makes your involvement essential. When our skill at using AI exceeds that of our peers and leaders, they'll rely on us more to use it and get the advantages it offers. More than ever, this is an opportunity for designers to become the go-to experts in how AI shapes design decisions, not just outputs.

Personal Foundation

All of these skills are amplified by how we show up. Our habits, mindset, and self-awareness influence every interaction we have.

DISCIPLINE

Discipline in your daily life matters for many reasons. Developing healthy habits, consistent routines, and reliable rhythms creates stability, not just personally but professionally as well. You're already here reading this book, so it's safe to assume you have also read one of the many personal development books like The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. It may feel cliché, but these ideas persist for a reason: they address a real, universal need. We all benefit from more stability, less chaos, and fewer unnecessary interruptions.

When you build strong habits, you're not only more effective, you're also more consistent. Discipline shows up in how you prepare, how you communicate, and how you follow through. It earns trust and respect over time. It also changes how you engage with others. You become more proactive, less reactive, and better able to navigate conversations thoughtfully instead of emotionally. If nothing else, let this be a reminder to revisit your own habits and approaches to discipline. It will help you communicate your designs more effectively.

BEING AUTHENTIC

While each of the previous skills contributes to being articulate, there's something more foundational that's not technically a skill: how you show up. This isn't about learning a new technique. It's about understanding who you are, how you provide value, and bringing the best version of yourself into your work.

You must be yourself. People can tell when someone is being fake, and it rarely builds trust. When you're relaxed and genuine, you think more clearly, connect more easily, and build stronger relationships. Your

personality—how you engage, listen, or make others feel—matters more than any script you could follow.

FINDING YOUR VOICE

At the same time, being authentic doesn't mean defaulting to every natural reaction. In practice, it's more about finding your voice (or even your *voices*). The way you show up with your team may differ from how you engage with executives. Recognizing what a situation calls for, and adjusting accordingly, is part of being effective.

This also includes the kind of energy you bring into a room. We've all worked with people who are enjoyable to be around—people who are engaged, positive, and present. They smile, show interest, express enthusiasm, and generally make others feel comfortable. These behaviors aren't accidental. They have a real impact on how others perceive and respond to them.

AUTHENTICITY VERSUS EFFECTIVENESS

For some, this can feel forced or even inauthentic. Suggestions like "be more positive" or "smile more" can come with baggage that doesn't land on everyone in the same way. That's fair. But intentionally choosing how you show up isn't necessarily about being fake; sometimes it's simply about being effective.

I see this when coaching designers. Someone may be perceived as difficult to work with not because their ideas are wrong but because of how they communicate them. A rigid or overly critical approach can erode trust even when it's grounded in good intentions. The answer isn't necessarily changing what they believe but finding a more effective way to communicate it.

THE BEST VERSION OF YOURSELF

So yes, be yourself. But be intentional about being the *best* version of yourself. You can be direct and assertive while still being positive, open, and respectful. You can adapt to the environment without losing who you are. There will be moments when you need to be more deliberate, composed, or measured because the situation calls for it. That doesn't make you inauthentic. It makes you effective.

Be the version of yourself that builds trust, invites collaboration, and makes others want to engage with you. That's the source of real influence.

Always Be Learning

These aren't the only skills that matter, and that's the point. Any new skill you develop contributes to a more well-rounded perspective and strengthens your ability to navigate conversations, build relationships, and gain support for your work.

In that sense, this is as much about a mindset of learning as it is about specific skills. Staying curious, being open to ideas, and putting yourself in new situations will naturally improve how you communicate. Your willingness to grow is one of the most important advantages you can have.

For example, my undergraduate degree is in marketing, and my master's is in intercultural communication, a mix of anthropology, human behavior, and communication. Neither is a traditional path into design, but both have been incredibly valuable throughout my career, especially in navigating relationships and understanding how organizations work.

Whether you learn another language, pick up a new tool, or teach a class, these experiences build capabilities that transfer directly into how you articulate your design decisions. Over time, it all adds up. The more you learn, the more context you have. The more context you have, the more clearly you can think, communicate, and influence.

So keep learning. Not just to improve your craft, but to expand your perspective. You don't need to become someone else to become a more articulate designer. Keep adding to the skills you have, stay curious about the ones you don't, and become more intentional about how you show up. It will make a difference in every conversation you have and every decision you're trusted to influence.

How you show up matters, but articulation isn't something you do by yourself. The person on the other side of the conversation brings their own personality, experience, motivations, and perspective too.

So far, we've spent most of our time looking at ourselves: the decisions we make, the framework we use to make them, and the skills that help us communicate them. Now it's time to turn our attention to everyone else. In the next chapter, we'll look at how developing empathy for our

stakeholders helps us understand their perspective, communicate more effectively, and ultimately build stronger relationships.

[Part II]

Stakeholders Are People Too

[5]

Developing Empathy for Stakeholders

One of the biggest opportunities designers have to improve communication has nothing to do with speaking more clearly. It has to do with building stronger relationships.

Trust is rarely earned in a single meeting. It's built over time through small interactions, genuine curiosity, and consistently showing that you understand what matters to other people. The stronger those relationships become, the easier it is to manage conversations, navigate disagreement, and earn support for your work.

Ironically, empathy is already one of our greatest strengths. We spend countless hours trying to understand our users and their goals, frustrations, motivations, and behaviors so we can create better products for them. Yet we often forget to apply that same level of curiosity to the people we work with every day.

If we want our ideas to succeed, we need to understand our stakeholders just as well. That means seeing the project through their eyes, understanding the pressures they face, and helping them succeed alongside us. Because when our stakeholders are successful, our designs have a much better chance of succeeding too.

The purpose of this chapter is to take a step back from the process before we get into a meeting about our design work. We begin with a high-level view of our stakeholder relationships so that we can approach them in the most effective way. In order to do that, we need to:

See them as human
: Everyone has other things going on that we simply cannot predict.

Ask good questions
: Understand how their interests outside of the office affect their perspective.

Develop empathy
: Get to know their viewpoint so intimately that we're driven to action.

Create shared experiences
: Finding common ground is important to earning trust.

Seeing Them as Human

The trouble with people is that we're all so unpredictable and yet so incredibly predictable at the same time. Often the people in your meetings are dealing with things, in both their personal and professional lives, that are more important to them than your current design project. People are busy (or at least they think they are). "I have too many things going on right now" or "I have to get to another meeting." Whatever the case, a lot of people you need help from are not always focused on the thing you want them to be. More than that, their attitudes and responses to your work might have more to do with the things happening outside of your conversation than what you're showing them.

Before we go any further, stop for just a minute and think about the people on your project. Call to mind their faces, names, and even their role in the company. Now, pause and remember: they are human. Each one has feelings, emotions, and a past that speaks into their present every single day. They all have relationships outside of work that include friends, spouses, parents, and children. When they're finished with your meeting, they're going to go visit their mother in the hospital. One of them has to shuttle their kids to an athletic game. And someone else will go home to have a difficult conversation with their spouse. Despite the fact that we spend so much time together during working hours, all of these people's most important relationships are somewhere else.

We can't pretend to know what's going on inside their heads, but we can remember that the way they respond to our ideas may have as much to do

with everything else happening in their lives as it does with us. There are just too many other factors, distractions, and problems in the average person's life for us to ever assume that the thing we want from them is the thing they care about.

In psychology, the concept of attribution describes how we explain other people's behavior. Interestingly, we tend to assume that other people's actions are driven by who they are, while we explain our own actions by the situation we're in. You see, we may have an unfair view of our stakeholders' reactions. It's natural to think, "They're controlling," "They're difficult," or "They just don't understand design," but those explanations are often incomplete.

Was your colleague short with you in the hallway about the new interactions you made? Maybe they're dealing with some issues in their personal life. Did that guy in your last meeting throw you under the bus? Perhaps he's feeling pressure from his boss. Has an executive ever shown up and declared that everything had to be changed? It's possible he just came from a meeting where his budget was slashed. Stakeholder reactions to our design work often have an underlying situational explanation that we might never know about. I always prefer to believe the best about people, rather than assume the worst about their intentions.

I will never forget the time when a manager came to our team late in the day with an emergency request. Suddenly, everything we were working on had to be stopped so that we could put together some concepts for a completely new, different idea. I tried to understand, but it just didn't make sense nor did it line up with what we had agreed on previously. A few days later he dropped the project and told us to go back to our original work. Later, I found out that he had lost one of his biggest accounts and was on the verge of missing his financial goals near bonus time. This new project was a last-ditch effort to make something happen, but he would never have told us that.

Of course, it wasn't appropriate for him to treat our team that way, but that's not the point. The point is that there was something else going on that we didn't understand. And actually, there are *always* other things going on in the room that you will never know about. There are *always* things that are influencing people's behaviors that we are not privy to. And there will *always* be things that we simply can't predict. Always.

Our job as articulate designers is to recognize this reality so that we can talk to the people that we work with in a way that pushes past all the distractions and gets down to the core thing we need to know to be successful. We need to recognize that the way people react to our work may not have anything to do with us or our designs at all. So, as often as you need to, stop, take a look at the people around you, and remember: they are human.

Asking Good Questions

One of the best ways to see the perspective of our stakeholders is simply to ask good questions: about them, their life, their work. The same way that you would expect to get to know users by asking questions, we can apply the same approach to our relationship with stakeholders.

This is where the skill of being a great conversationalist comes in handy because it is largely about knowing the right questions to ask in order to engage them and get them talking. When you ask the right questions, people feel valued. And when they feel valued, they'll want to talk to us more and, as a result, listen to us when it matters the most.

SHOWING GENUINE INTEREST

Most people enjoy talking about the things that matter to them. Even people who are less inclined to volunteer information still enjoy chatting about the stuff that's important to them. So, take the time to know a little bit about each person so that you can begin to see that their life doesn't revolve around work. Don't ask yes/no questions, and don't get so personal that you overstep normal social behavior. Keep it light, but let them tell you what they're willing to tell. Questions like:

- What did you do this weekend?
- Any fun plans coming up?
- What's been keeping you busy outside of work?
- What's been the most interesting part of your week so far?

These questions are so basic yet so valuable. They are general enough to be safe with any audience and can create conversation to help you see their perspective.

People also love to talk about their kids or pets. In a one-on-one with a stakeholder, I asked if she had any pets. She immediately lit up and pulled out her phone to show me a remote camera she had set up for her outdoor cat enclosure. That quickly turned into a conversation about the technology behind it and, naturally, the UX of the app. What started as a simple question gave her something she enjoyed talking about and gave me an opportunity to demonstrate my own expertise. It helped build trust before we even got into the work. You never know how a simple question can strengthen a relationship and set you up for a better conversation.

SHARING SOMETHING OF YOURSELF

But it's not a one-way street. You should also offer some information about yourself to get people talking. Find something that you're interested in and ask them about it:

- I went camping this past weekend; do you like camping?
- We hosted my family for dinner last night; do you like to cook?
- I saw this great movie yesterday; have you seen it?

Offering people a glimpse into your own life is a great way to give people permission to talk about themselves too—and you may find that you have a lot in common.

While visiting a client in New York, he offered to take me to lunch in his car. It was small, but I noticed it had an upgraded exhaust system. Since I'm restoring a classic car myself, I asked him about it. That sparked a conversation about cars, which eventually led to him telling me a story about borrowing money to buy a plane. I'd been working with him for months and had no idea he was a pilot! Now, every time we talk, he shares updates about flying because he knows I'm interested. By sharing a bit of myself, I created space for real connection.

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS

But seeing our stakeholder's perspective requires that we understand how they approach their jobs and our project, too. So, it's important to get to know how people think in our work context, as well. Ask things like:

- What did you think of the meeting last week?

- How's your work going on the other project?
- What are you feeling good about?

If you're having a difficult time understanding the people in charge, it could be that the stated goals or priorities for the project actually differ from the individual's. In that case, I suggest being as direct as possible when trying to uncover people's viewpoints and perspectives in situations where they can be difficult to read. For example:

- What is your priority for this project?
- What matters to you most regarding this initiative?
- What do you think is most important for success?

Allowing people to express their own opinion or perspective may give you insights that differ from company goals or project objectives.
I once worked with a manager whose priorities seemed to conflict with our goal of improving conversion. To better understand his perspective, I asked how the project affected his goals. He explained that his top priority was migrating off the old platform as quickly as possible. During the transition, he was paying to support both systems, which put him under significant pressure. Officially, the project was about improving conversion, but for him, success meant replacing the platform. Understanding that shift in priorities made a big difference. Once I saw what he actually cared about, our conversations—and decisions—became much more productive.
Again, the purpose of asking questions is to get the other person to talk to you about what's important to them. You want to understand more about their perspective so that you have a better sense of how to respond to them, when needed. That's how you create an awareness of the other person's viewpoint and set yourself up for a better relationship, better communication, and better success in creating the best user experience.

Applying User Empathy to Stakeholders

If all of this is starting to sound familiar, it should. We already do this kind of work all the time…with users. People in UX talk a lot about developing empathy for users. If we can have true empathy for them, we'll build better

applications. But what about our stakeholders? We need to empathize with them, too, if we really expect to get through to them.

Developing empathy for our stakeholders means attempting to look at our project from their perspective so that we're no longer defensive and protective of our own ideas. We realize their reactions and suggestions are based on a reality that, for them, is more important than our own. When you have empathy for stakeholders, you not only understand their perspective but you're actually driven to action; you want to make changes to your designs because you feel their pain.

This is the point at which the script flips for you. When you have true empathy for your stakeholders, you'll see your role as being one of helping them succeed. Your success depends on their success. You'll find ways to solve problems for them, whether that's accommodating their perspective in your design work or simply presenting your work in a way that appeals to their needs. You'll see the urgency of meeting their needs and want to do something about it.

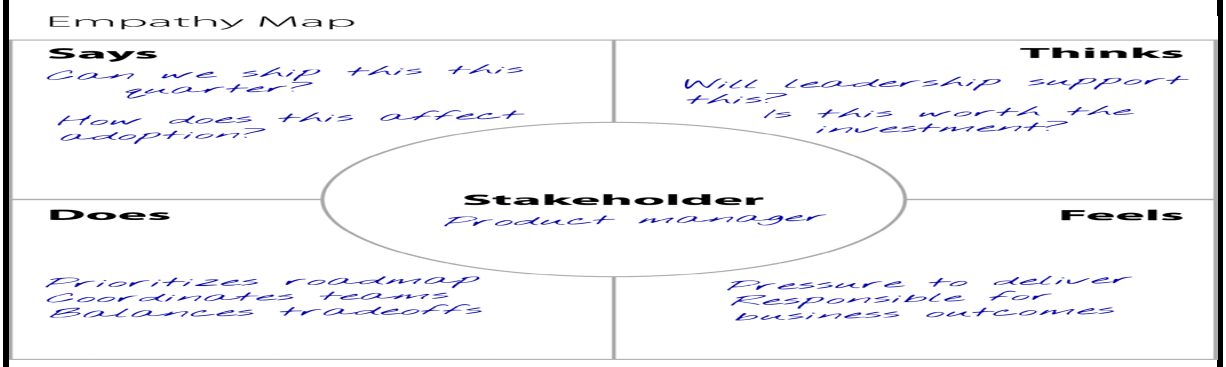
That doesn't mean that you do anything and everything they say. It simply means that your priority for communicating with them has shifted from a position of defense to one of solidarity. You still might disagree on the solution, but at least now you're better prepared to talk to them about your choices.



The stakeholder brain demystified! Our stakeholders have valuable domain knowledge and information about the business that we need to be successful.

As designers, we already have a toolbox for understanding people. We just tend to reserve those tools for users. Many of those same techniques work equally well for understanding the people we work with every day. For example, an empathy map can help us organize what a stakeholder says, thinks, does, and feels, making it easier to anticipate concerns and communicate more effectively.

Like any UX tool, the value isn't in filling out the template. It's in changing how you think about the people you're trying to understand.



Creating an empathy map for stakeholders is a valuable tool for understanding their perspective. You can download this template at http://tomgreever.com/resources.

LEADING WITH VISION

I once worked with an executive who was a visionary thinker, while we were focused on building a simple minimum viable product (MVP) for the first release. In early meetings, he seemed underwhelmed. He was present, but not engaged. Trying to see things from his perspective, I realized he was thinking about the long-term vision, a big, impactful release, while we were focused on small, immediate steps.

So I adjusted my approach. In each meeting, I brought two things: the practical MVP we needed to deliver as well as a high-fidelity vision of where we could go in the future. It was extra work, but it paid off. The vision captured his interest, while the MVP grounded our progress. By connecting the present to a compelling future, I was able to keep him engaged and ultimately gain stronger support for the work we needed to do now.

If I hadn't stopped to consider how he viewed our project, I might have missed this opportunity to keep him engaged. I could have even risked losing his support. It was more work, but it was worth it because it earned his trust and kept the work moving forward. In fact, I've found that it's often a best practice when working with executives to show both what's possible in the short term and what's preferred for the future. This approach creates a buzz that keeps everyone excited and makes them more likely to support you.

Creating Shared Experiences

Often, our inability to see the perspective of another person results from a lack of shared experiences. We simply don't have enough in common with them. Why do some people seem to get along better than others? Why are we immediately drawn to some people, but not others? It's because we have something in common with them. When we have shared experiences, we have something to talk about. When we don't have anything in common with another person, the conversation can feel much harder. Everything we think of falls flat. However, everyone has *something* in common with another person; this is why the weather is such an easy thing to talk about. And although the weather is a perfectly fine experience to share, if we want to understand our stakeholders, we need to be willing to go deeper than that.

That's not to say that we should dig into people's personal lives. Actually, there are plenty of ways we can create shared experiences with other people on a professional level. It can be something as simple as going to lunch together or catching up at the end of the day. It doesn't matter what you talk about: work, life, or the show you watched last night. The point is that you're removing yourself, your ego, and the pressure of the minute-to-minute business of work. You're out of your usual context and experiencing something with this other person that you would not have otherwise.

Many companies organize team building and informal gatherings of employees for this very reason. But, if that's not built into your culture, you can make it happen on your own. Other ways of creating shared experiences include going to a conference, volunteering at your company's annual charity, or asking that person's advice. "Hey, I was thinking of buying a telescope and I know you're into astronomy. What would you recommend?" Finding ways to create connections with other people is an important step toward understanding them.

A ROAD TRIP WITH JOSH

I'll never forget how drastically my relationship with a colleague changed after a shared experience. Josh worked in a similar role in another department, and we crossed paths on projects using the same resources. I

saw him as difficult, unorganized, inconsiderate, and someone whose ideas just created extra work for me.

Then, by chance, we ended up working at the same conference. We drove together, stayed at the same resort, and spent several days out of our usual context talking, working, and sharing meals. It didn't take long for my perspective to shift.

Almost immediately, his ideas felt inspiring instead of disruptive. He wasn't inconsiderate, just busy and less detail-oriented. Nothing about him had changed, only my understanding of him because of our shared experiences. From that point on, working together became much easier, and he eventually became one of my strongest allies.

You don't need to go on a road trip with stakeholders to create shared experiences. Finding that common ground can be as simple as bringing up something interesting before the meeting starts. You might notice that they have the latest tech gadget, are wearing a brand you like, or have a souvenir on their desk. Anything you can do to find common ground is helpful and reminds us that we're all human. Often, the only thing keeping us from developing good relationships is ourselves.

Empathy helps us understand that our stakeholders are not obstacles standing in the way of good design. They are people with goals, pressures, incentives, fears, and responsibilities of their own. But understanding that they have motivations is only the beginning.

The more useful question is: what motivations? Why does one stakeholder obsess over timelines while another focuses on quality? Why does one person constantly challenge your decisions while another quietly supports them? Why do two people react so differently to the exact same design?

If we want to communicate effectively, we need to understand not just who our stakeholders are, but what drives them. In the next chapter, we'll explore the values behind their decisions and how those values shape the way they respond to our work.

[6]

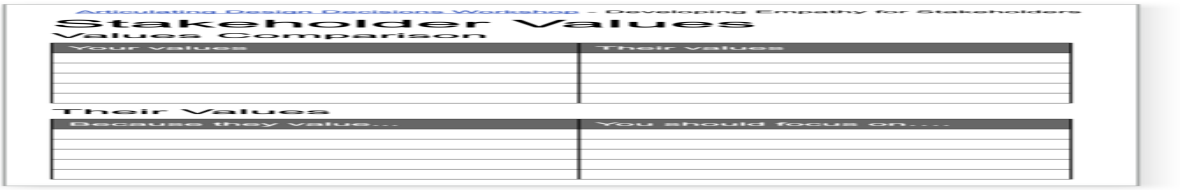
Identifying Stakeholder Values

Now that we've taken time to understand our stakeholders and ask better questions, we can begin identifying what's important to them: their values. Everyone has a set of values that guides their decisions. Some are inherited from our home culture and family of origin. Others are shaped over time as we encounter new experiences throughout our lives. More still are absorbed from the working environments we've been a part of. And of course, our role and job title dictate a lot about what's important to us in the context of a meeting.

An Exercise in Values

With this in mind, let's walk through a simple exercise to identify the values of a stakeholder you work with. Perhaps it is your boss or another leader at your company. It could be anyone whose support you need in your work. Call them to mind, consider what you know about them, and think about what truly drives their perspective.

This exercise is simple: create two columns—one for your values and one for your stakeholder's—and then compare the two. You can use the worksheet I've provided, or any notepad or text editor will do. I'll walk you through each step of the process. You may discover that your stakeholders aren't just evaluating your work. In many cases, they're trying to accomplish something of their own.



Comparing your values to the values of your stakeholder can be eye-opening! You can download a worksheet for this exercise from my website at *http://tomgreever.com/resources*.

Comparing Values

Before making assumptions about your stakeholders, it can be helpful (and humbling) to look in the mirror first. Take a moment to reflect on your own values and write down four or five of the most important.
When you are presenting your work, ask yourself:

- What is important to me?
- What do I tend to emphasize?
- What do I always want to hold onto?
- What motivates me or gives me energy?

Hopefully that got you thinking about your own values. Now apply these same questions to your stakeholders:

- What is important to them?
- What do they tend to emphasize?
- What do they always want to hold onto?
- What motivates them or gives them energy?

You may not have a lot of confidence in what your stakeholder values yet, and that's OK. This exercise is just a starting point.
Now let's look back on the values you wrote for yourself. If you're a designer, I imagine you might have written one or two similar to these:

- Understanding the problem

- User-centered design
- Validating with research
- Leveraging the design system

These are pretty typical for people in design roles, and it's easy to see why we would value these things.
As for your stakeholder, if you chose a product manager (PM) or leader, you might have values that look like these:

- Managing the roadmap
- Meeting a deadline
- Launching new features
- Improving metrics

But those answers are almost too easy. Of course a product manager cares about the roadmap. We need to go a little deeper. Think of these as priorities rather than personal values. They tell us *what* someone is focused on but not necessarily *why*. To understand that, we need to look at the underlying values driving those priorities. So take another pass, but this time I'd like you to think a bit more about the individual and what makes them tick. Let's go a level deeper by considering personality traits:
What personality traits do they have?

- Introverted or extroverted?
- Outspoken or reserved?
- Analytical or intuitive?
- Detail-oriented or big-picture?
- Risk-averse or risk-tolerant?
- Change-resistant or change-oriented?
- Efficiency-focused or quality-focused?
- Independent or collaborative?

You don’t need to psychoanalyze anyone here. Please don’t diagnose your PM during a design review. But these traits can give you clues about some of the underlying values that may influence how they approach your work. When you take it a level deeper, you’ll uncover values like:

Achievement
: Doing great work and achieving meaningful results

Competence
: Being seen as competent and credible

Growth
: Earning trust, influence, or leadership opportunities

Reliability
: Delivering on goals and meeting expectations

Security
: Reducing risk and avoiding failure

Autonomy
: Feeling a sense of ownership or control

Validation
: Being respected and valued by others

Momentum
: Making progress and moving things forward

Identifying these values isn’t just a mental exercise; it should change how you facilitate your meetings. For example, if you realize a stakeholder values being seen as competent, your goal is to focus more on helping them contribute meaningfully to the conversation and creating opportunities for their expertise to be visible.

Now that you have both lists, compare them. What do you see?

Are there any shared values?
: I find that I share a lot of the same values with my stakeholders but often in a different order of priority. For example, both of us might value “design excellence,” but while I might have that at the very top of my list, they would put it further down.

Are there any values that conflict with one another?

> A common one is when our stakeholders value quick delivery or meeting deadlines, but we value following our process and doing our due diligence. A potential conflict in priorities is a signal you should pay attention to and possibly look for opportunities to align. A PM isn't choosing speed because they don't care about quality. They're choosing speed because, in that moment, shipping is the higher priority.

In that way, many disagreements are not about who's right. They're about which value takes priority. We may both care about quality, usability, and meeting deadlines, but if we rank those priorities differently, we'll naturally arrive at different conclusions. Recognizing that shift changes the conversation from defending a solution to discussing tradeoffs.

A Values-Informed Approach

Now that we have a set of values to work from, let's use them to inform how we approach our stakeholders. Knowing their values is only the first step; that knowledge should change how you interact with them. You aren't trying to change what your stakeholders value. You're trying to frame your work in terms of the things they already care about.
So take a look at their values and for each one, ask yourself:

- *What should I focus on?*
- *How does this change the way I present my work?*

I've found that most of the time, it's enough to simply *lead* with an acknowledgment of their values *before* you get into the details. For example, if you know they care about the deadline and your design introduces some new complexity, it might be enough to start with something like:

> "I know we're working toward this deadline and I want to keep us on track, so I'm interested to hear what you think of some new details I've uncovered…."

I've walked into meetings knowing that the design I was about to show would make a PM nervous about the schedule. Simply acknowledging that concern before showing the work completely changed the conversation.

In this way, you're actively appealing to what you know is important to them first. Otherwise, if you were to jump straight to an unexpected, new concept, they're likely to be distracted thinking, *"Woah there, designer! This is going to throw off our schedule!"* and the conversation is already off to a rough start. Leverage these values to keep things moving.

With that in mind, make a list of what you should focus on or how their values inform your work with them. I will include a few common examples for inspiration:

EXECUTIVES AND LEADERS

This is a broad group, but most leader-types care about similar outcomes. Your job is usually to bring them up to speed, hear their reactions, and allow them to participate in our processes.

BECAUSE THEY VALUE...	YOU SHOULD FOCUS ON...
• Concise information • Growing the business • Solving problems	• Getting to the point • Accomplishing goals • Describing the solution

DEVELOPERS OR ENGINEERS

Developers can be some of our biggest allies and most enjoy helping create a great user experience. Still, the heavy lifting usually falls on them, so their values tend to center around efficiency or speed.

BECAUSE THEY VALUE...	YOU SHOULD FOCUS ON...
• Building it once and minimizing rework • Efficiency and maintainable code • Understanding the effort involved	• Understanding all of the use cases up front • Maximizing existing scope and reusing UI patterns • Communicating the value for the users or business

PRODUCT MANAGERS

PMs are some of our closest collaborators. Even when the relationship isn't perfect, we're usually aligned on many of the same goals. Focusing on that

shared ground is a powerful way to improve how we work together.

BECAUSE THEY VALUE...	YOU SHOULD FOCUS ON...
• Delivering customer value • Roadmap progress • Prioritization and tradeoffs	• Showing how the design solves real user problems • Explaining how the design helps move initiatives forward • Making tradeoffs explicit and discussing alternatives

Before we move on to the last part of this exercise, I want to pause for a moment to reflect on what we've done so far by asking: *Was this harder than you expected?* Maybe you weren't entirely sure what your stakeholder values. That's normal, and actually useful. This exercise often reveals how little we truly understand about the people we work with. Use that as motivation to learn more.

As we discussed in the previous chapter, one of the best ways to understand your stakeholders is simply to ask. Most people appreciate the effort. You can even use your observations as a starting point: "*I've noticed you tend to focus on these areas—is that what matters most to you?*" When you frame it as wanting to focus on what matters most to them, people are usually receptive and happy to help. These don't have to be formal interviews. They often come up naturally in one-on-ones or casual conversations before a meeting begins. Over time, you'll begin recognizing patterns in what different people consistently emphasize.

Stakeholder Stories

Now, let's turn these values into something more tangible using a familiar tool: user stories. You may be familiar with user stories as a tool for understanding users, but have you ever written a "user story" for your stakeholders? I've found that this same tool can be very useful when applied to them.

The format is:

> As a [job title], I should be able to [what] so that I [why].

For example, if you wanted to write a story for a developer, it might look like this:

> As a **developer**, I should be able to **write quality code** so that I **don't have to deal with so many bugs or a lot of maintenance**.

This reveals how a developer might evaluate your work, not just against requirements but against long-term effort and maintenance. That gives you an opportunity to present your work in such a way as to acknowledge this viewpoint and demonstrate how your design choices are intended to help. When you do that, you are much more likely to get their support.
Now consider the stakeholder you have in mind. Take a look at the values you wrote for them and try to write a few "user stories" from their perspective. Here are a few examples to get you started.

EXECUTIVES AND LEADERS

- As an executive, I should be able to see what the team is working on so that I can share it with the leadership team.
- As an executive, I should be able to provide feedback on my products' design to help improve them.
- As an executive, I should be able to provide a vision and roadmap for the future so that my team can be excited about where we are headed.

DEVELOPERS OR ENGINEERS

- As a developer, I should be able to build a solid application so that I can be proud of my work.
- As a developer, I should be able to use the latest technology so that I can get more done in less time.
- As a developer, I should be able to understand all the requirements up front so that I can plan my work and maximize my time.

PRODUCT MANAGERS

- As a PM, I should be able to create value for customers so that the product solves meaningful problems and supports the business.
- As a PM, I should be able to move important initiatives forward so that the team can make steady progress toward our goals.
- As a PM, I should be able to prioritize effectively so that we focus on what matters most and avoid unnecessary distractions.

You may have experience with other tools, like personas, job stories, or journey maps. The specific method matters less than the intent: taking the time to understand your stakeholder's perspective.

Framing the Same Decision Differently

With this perspective in mind, the same design decision can be presented in different ways depending on what your stakeholder values.
For example, suppose you've added a confirmation step before permanently deleting an important record:
To a product manager:

> "This reduces the chance of accidental deletions, which should help prevent customer frustration and support our retention goals."

To a developer:

> "This uses the same confirmation pattern we already use elsewhere, so we can reuse existing components and keep the implementation consistent."

To an executive:

> "This reduces customer mistakes while keeping us on track for the release."

That's part of being an articulate designer: the design doesn't change, but the way you explain it might. Each explanation emphasizes a different benefit based on what that stakeholder is most likely to value. You're not manipulating the conversation or changing your rationale but, rather, leading with the part of the solution that's most meaningful to the person you're speaking with.

Our Stakeholders Represent Our Work

This exercise highlights an important insight: stakeholders often evaluate our work through a different lens than the stated project goal. If they

disagree with our solutions, it's not necessarily that we didn't do a good job solving the problem—it may be that they have a different need we haven't considered. Reviewing designs may be secondary to other, unstated priorities.

This is where another user-centered framework is helpful: *Jobs to Be Done*. When a stakeholder joins a meeting about our design work, what are they actually trying to accomplish? *What is their "job to be done" in that moment?*

I'd like to use the first example in the previous list to demonstrate this, because it's more common than we realize:

> As an **executive**, I should be able to **see what the team is working on** so that **I can share it with the leadership team**.

You see, often what our leaders need isn't just approval of our work—it's confidence in how to represent it in their next meeting. Yes, they may need to weigh in or make decisions, but they're also thinking ahead: *How do I talk about this in my next meeting? How do I explain it?* Your design meeting may be only one meeting in a long chain of meetings, and you're probably not invited to the next one.

In that case, part of our job may be about making sure they have what they need to be successful in that other room. We need to be sure we are giving them the tools, vocabulary, and artifacts they would need to represent our work to someone else in a meeting that we aren't part of. And if we can do that well, they're more likely to support us.

This shift in perspective should change how we prepare. In addition to the designs themselves, we might also provide:

- A simple bullet list of talking points
- A few slides with screenshots
- A summary of the decisions we made
- An outline of the project status and timeline

Seeing our work through the lens of our stakeholders opens up new ways to support them, make their job easier, and build trust in the process. That doesn't mean doing everything for them or becoming a slide factory. It

simply means recognizing that how our work is communicated, especially when we're not in the room, is part of the work itself.

Once you begin identifying the values that drive your stakeholders, their reactions start to make more sense. You can see why certain conversations succeed while others fall apart. But understanding what motivates someone is only the beginning. In the next chapter, we'll look at how relationships turn that understanding into trust, credibility, and influence over time.

[7]

Building Influence with Stakeholders

It’s natural to think of our stakeholders as the primary people whose support we need to move a decision forward. In reality, there are often many people involved who can influence the outcome. Building influence with one stakeholder usually means building influence across a broader group. An articulate designer doesn’t wait until the meeting to start building support for the work.

That’s because influence starts before the meeting. It’s something we build over time, through conversations, alignment, and relationships. Most of the work happens before you ever walk into the room. By then, you should already have some momentum. The meeting becomes less about making decisions for the first time and more about reinforcing them and moving forward.

To do this well, we need to:

- Identify the people who influence decisions.
- Build a network of support people.
- Make it easy for others to advocate for our work.
- Maintain those relationships over time.

Understanding Different Stakeholders

Every project has a variety of people who influence its outcome. To keep it simple, let's consider three groups of people:

Team stakeholders
: The people on your direct team

Executive stakeholders
: The people who oversee your project

External stakeholders
: People outside of your team

TEAM STAKEHOLDERS

These are the people you work with every day: designers, developers, product managers (PMs), researchers, and your immediate leaders. While close collaboration can sometimes be challenging, it also gives you the best opportunity to understand what drives them and tailor your approach.

Your team is your strongest source of support. Through daily interaction, you build relationships, align on language, and reinforce the value of your work. It takes consistent effort to show up and lead through influence, but these are the people most likely to advocate for you.

EXECUTIVE STAKEHOLDERS

These are the people outside your immediate team who have significant influence over your project, typically leaders, executives, VPs, or even the CEO. Their support is critical. Without it, your work won't move forward.

The challenge is access and attention. You may not interact with them often, and when you do, they're balancing many competing priorities. That means you have to be intentional with every interaction. Observe how they think, learn from those who work closely with them, and make the most of limited time. Over time, you'll start to recognize patterns in what they value and how they respond, which helps you communicate more effectively.

EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

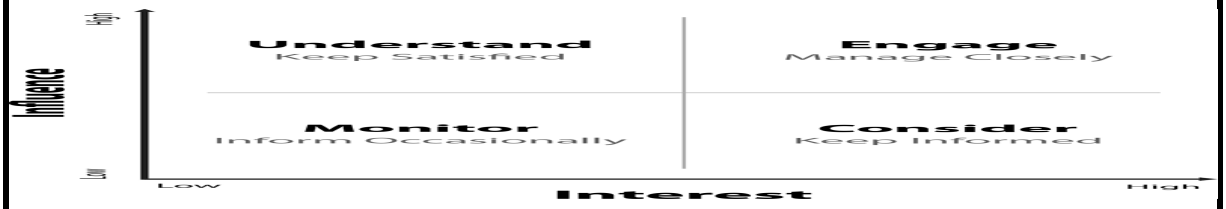
These are people who aren't directly involved in your project but can still influence its direction. They may sit in other parts of the organization, or even outside of it, and their input usually comes secondhand.

This might include people in finance, sales, or customer service. It can also be friends, spouses, or former colleagues of your stakeholders. You've

likely heard comments like, “I showed this to a friend and they didn’t think the button was obvious,” or “My spouse tried it and didn’t like the layout.” These perspectives can be helpful, but they can also introduce noise without full context. Part of your job is recognizing when this kind of influence is showing up and responding to it thoughtfully.

Managing Multiple Stakeholders

Of course, knowing who these people are creates another problem: you can’t possibly give all of them the same amount of attention. When working with multiple stakeholders, it’s important to be intentional about how you involve each person. Not everyone needs (or should have!) the same level of involvement. A helpful way to think about this is by mapping stakeholders based on their level of influence and interest.



Rank your stakeholders according to their influence and interest. This can help you understand how to involve them. You can download this template from my website at *http://tomgreever.com/resources.*

Rank your stakeholders in one of these quadrants to decide how to best invest your time and capacity:

Engage

High influence, high interest. These are your core collaborators. You’ll spend most of your time here, building alignment and driving decisions together.

Understand

High influence, low interest. This is the riskiest group, often including executive stakeholders. It’s critical to engage them thoughtfully so they stay aligned without disrupting progress.

Consider

High interest, low influence. Keep these stakeholders informed. They can offer valuable ideas and often become strong supporters, even if they aren’t making final decisions.

Monitor

> Low interest, low influence. Keep them in the loop occasionally. Their perspective can still be useful, and they may become more relevant over time.

You can't spend equal time with everyone, so being intentional about how you engage each group is key to managing your capacity effectively.

Creating a Support Network

The strongest support for a decision rarely comes from one person alone. You want other people who can reinforce the thinking, add credibility, and help move the conversation forward. When others support your ideas, especially people with influence, your own influence will grow too.

And don't wait to be invited into every conversation. If you know an important decision is taking shape somewhere else in the organization, find an appropriate way to participate. Ask for context, connect with the people involved, or offer to help. Some of the most important opportunities to influence the work happen before anyone thinks to schedule a design meeting.

BUILDING SUPPORT BEFORE THE MEETING

Those conversations are also opportunities to identify people who can support the work. Be on the lookout for them through one-on-one conversations, casual interactions, or simply paying attention to how people react in meetings. Think back to the stakeholders you identified earlier. Some already have credibility with your primary stakeholder, and their support carries weight. Focus on building relationships with those people early.

Most of this work happens before the meeting. People are sometimes hesitant to speak up in a group setting, especially if they sense leadership may disagree. That's why it's important to understand who is already aligned with your thinking before you walk into the room. In Japanese, there is a word for this: *nemawashi*. It is the practice of informally laying the groundwork, building consensus, and getting agreement before an official meeting takes place.

Start with your team. Designers, developers, and others involved in the process are often already on board; they just need a heads-up that you may

need their support. Then look beyond your team to others who are interested in the work or have influence. These are people who may be willing to support the work. By the time the meeting happens, you're not walking in alone.

ASKING FOR SUPPORT DIRECTLY

Do not assume these folks will speak up on their own; be explicit. Most people are happy to help if you ask. Give them enough context to understand the work and what you're proposing. This allows them to react early, offer input, and feel invested in the outcome.

You can also be intentional about how they help. That might look like reinforcing key points, asking helpful questions, or advocating in the moment. Share the agenda in advance, point out areas that may need support, and invite them to step in when it matters. You're inviting them to play an active role by giving them a clear way to support you.

You don't want the meeting to feel scripted, but you do want to make sure you're not carrying the conversation alone.

MAKING IT EASY TO SUPPORT YOU

As we saw in the previous chapter, people may need to represent your work in conversations you aren't part of. The same is true of your support network. Give them what they need—a few talking points, a short summary, or visuals they can reference—to explain the thinking clearly. Even if they agree with your direction, they may struggle to remember the details or explain the reasoning in the moment. Make their job easier. When other people can confidently explain your thinking, your influence extends beyond the room.

PEOPLE GET IT

After a meeting with an executive at a large ecommerce company, another executive pulled me aside and said, "I want your project to succeed. Let's review everything before these meetings so I can back you up next time." Here was someone who understood the value of alignment.

From that point on, she became part of my support network. I kept her informed and involved, and she became a strong advocate for our work, even in conversations where I wasn't present. People get this more than we think. Many stakeholders want to support good work; they just need a way to do it. Never underestimate the value of your support network!

Investing in Relationships

All relationships are built on trust. Early on, your credentials earn you the opportunity to do the work, but over time, your track record builds trust in your ability to deliver. That trust is what leads to more responsibility, more influence, and growth in your career. But trust doesn't only come from the quality of your work alone.

People tend to trust what's familiar: their own experiences, instincts, and the people they know. When stakeholders are uncertain, they often fall back on what feels most familiar to them. That might be their own opinion, past experience, or even someone they trust personally, regardless of expertise.

This is why stakeholders don't always default to trusting us, even when we are the experts. If they don't know us well or don't yet trust our thinking, they'll rely on something else they trust more. Which means part of our job is to build trust beyond the work itself.

We also have to build trust relationally to create that familiarity and trust. As we saw in Chapter 5, shared experiences, common interests, and simple human connection all play a role. Whether it's hobbies, the same university, kids, pets, or just regular interaction, these things create a sense that "we're alike." This is a built-in bias. Like it or not, we're wired to trust what feels familiar, so building relational familiarity is important too.

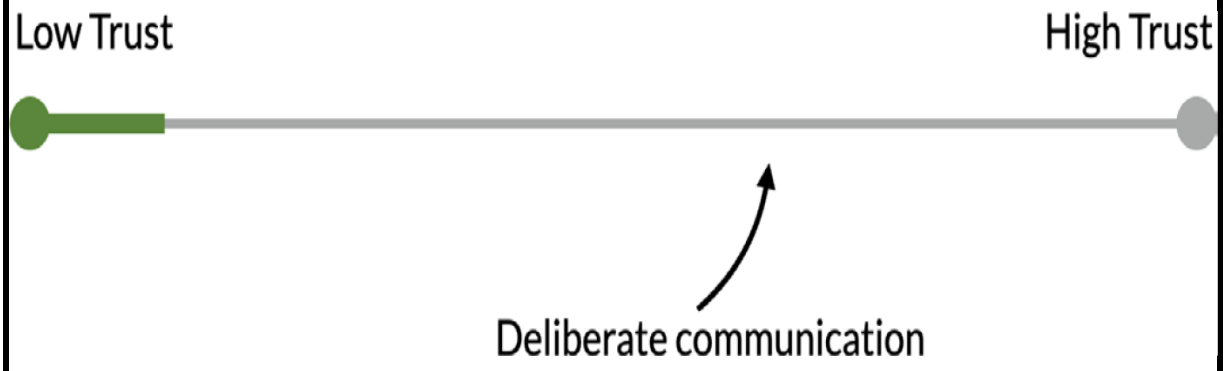
I like to think of it like this: the more trust you have with a stakeholder, the less time and effort you need to spend deliberately planning how you will communicate with them.



Think about that for a moment. When you have high trust, decisions are easier. It might be as simple as a direct message to get what you need to

move forward. In fact, they might support you, even if they aren't sure about your solution, simply because they trust you. I once had a stakeholder who was unsure about my recommendations, so she went to another leader and asked for their advice. That leader replied, "I'm not sure what the right solution is, but I know Tom and I would trust his recommendation." Even when I wasn't in the room, the trust I had built was doing the work for me.

But the opposite is true too: when there is low trust, we have to spend a lot more time thinking about how to communicate with them. We might do more planning, make slides, and practice the presentation. And it may not even be that trust is broken; it may be that we simply haven't had the time and capacity to build trust with them yet. Building trust takes time and effort, but it can pay for itself in the long run by not making it so time-consuming to get their support.



EARNING TRUST IN THE DETAILS

Not long after joining a startup as its design leader, I got an evening DM from the CEO: "Hey, I noticed these buttons are left aligned. It looks weird when the other stuff is centered. Can we fix this?"

He had always been deeply involved in details like this, and part of the reason I was hired was to build a design organization he could trust enough to step back from them. But I had only been there a few months. I hadn't earned that trust yet.

My first reaction was annoyance. Why does he even care about something this minor? I considered replying, "Sure, we'll fix it," because it didn't seem worth debating button alignment with the CEO. Then I had the

opposite reaction: maybe I should defend the decision and show him that I had strong opinions about good design too. Maybe that would earn trust.

I didn't do either. Instead, I replied, "Yes, I see what you mean. Let me look into it because I know we discussed both options." He still pushed: "It looks bad, so probably worth centering it." But I had bought myself some time.

The next day, the designer who worked on it reminded me that we had tried centering the buttons. The problem was that they then appeared visually associated with the search feature above them. Left-aligning them made it clearer that they belonged with the content and tabs below.

The CEO wasn't wrong. Centered did look more visually balanced. But the left-aligned version communicated the relationship between the controls more clearly. When I explained that reasoning, he replied, "OK, yeah, I can see that. I'll leave it with you!"

Either of my first two instincts would have been a mistake. If I had simply made the change, I would have reinforced the idea that he needed to keep catching these details himself. If I had immediately defended the design, I would have been arguing from confidence without actually explaining the decision.

Instead, I took his concern seriously, learned why the decision had been made, and came back with a logical explanation. That small interaction became another deposit of trust. If you want stakeholders to step back and trust your judgment, you have to give them evidence that they can. Sometimes that happens one button at a time.

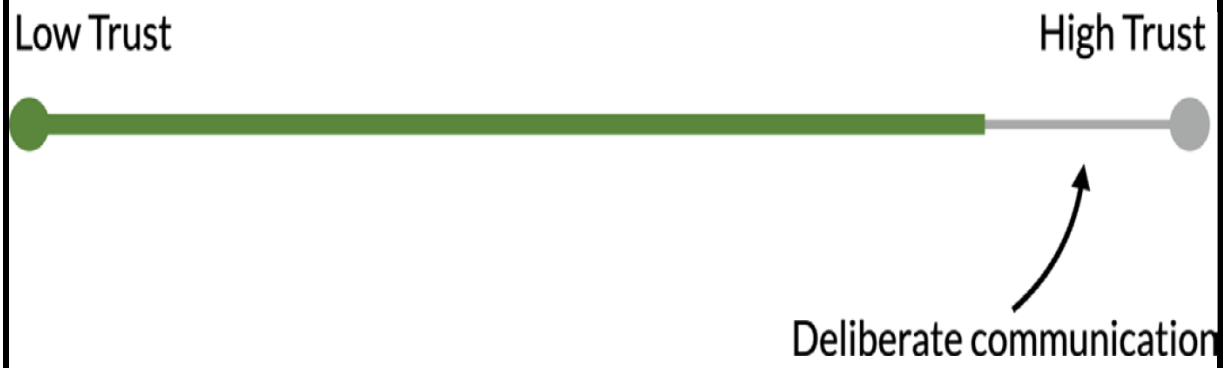
BE INTENTIONAL IN EVERYDAY INTERACTIONS

Building trust isn't about adding more to your schedule; it's about being intentional. Showing up as the best version of ourselves, being a good conversationalist, asking good questions—all the skills we looked at in Chapter 4 are helpful here.

But that also means being thoughtful about the methods we use. Not everything should be a message or an email. If you're in person, stop by their desk to say hello. If you're remote, schedule a quick coffee chat. These small moments are how relationships are built over time.

While technology has made communication faster, it has not always made it better. If all of your interactions are transactional, your relationships will

be too. Taking time for casual, human conversations improves both the relationship and your ability to work together.



SIMPLE WAYS TO BUILD TRUST

You don't need grand gestures. Small, thoughtful actions go a long way. Show people you're paying attention and that you care. I've found that casual check-ins, handwritten notes, and simple, inexpensive gifts are effective ways to create these connections because they're personal and often unexpected.

Check in and offer to help

One simple way to build rapport is to check in on people from time to time. Follow up on something they mentioned, ask about what's going on in their life, share something that made you think of them, or offer help when you see an opportunity.

I often keep notes on people I work with so I can remember details they've shared. That way, when we talk, I can ask about their dog's surgery, new house, or recent trip. It takes almost no time, but people notice and appreciate it.

Handwritten notes

When most communication is digital, a handwritten note stands out. I keep blank greeting cards on hand and send them when there's a natural opportunity: a thank you, congratulations, encouragement, or simply to let someone know I appreciate them. And I'm not particularly good at this! I have to set reminders and have the supplies on hand to remember to do it. I've sent cards to new leaders after accepting a job and mailed printed photos to a colleague after seeing him speak at a conference. The fact that I remembered and took a few minutes to do something personal really stands

out to people. Some people tell me they've kept my notes for years afterward.

Simple, thoughtful gifts

The same is true of small gifts. They shouldn't be extravagant or transactional, just something that shows you were paying attention. Of course, be mindful of company policies, cultural expectations, and use good judgment, but I've found small gifts to have a big impact on my relationships.

Once, a peer mentioned she was going camping, so I mailed her a bag of marshmallows. Another time, my boss mentioned that she constantly broke the hair clips she fidgeted with during meetings, so I sent her a fresh box "for meetings only," Both were inexpensive, a little unexpected, and specific to the person, which made them both memorable and meaningful. This gesture can be shared too: bring breakfast to an early meeting, grab coffee for the team, or share something everyone will enjoy. What matters is that you show you care and are thinking of others. Those small moments build trust in a way that work alone can't.

THIS IS PART OF THE WORK

It can feel like building relationships has nothing to do with design. Many designers expect their work to speak for itself. But in reality, relationships shape how our work is received.

I want people to know that I'm there to help them succeed, to make their jobs easier, and to contribute to great outcomes. Going out of my way to do these small things is how I express that. And over time, it makes it much easier to have meaningful conversations about the work.

Because at the end of the day, we're not just defenders of pixels; we're people working with other people to build something meaningful. And when people trust us, they're more open, more receptive, and more willing to move forward.

What About Remote Environments?

I've spent much of my career working remotely, so a lot of the examples I've shared come from a remote context. At a foundational level, the principles are the same for both remote and in-person: building influence, understanding stakeholders, and investing in relationships all work the same way. What *does* change is how intentional you have to be.

In an office, many of these interactions happen naturally. You run into people in the hallway, chat before meetings, or catch up over lunch. In remote environments, those moments don't exist unless you create them. That means relationship-building requires more deliberate effort. You have to *replace proximity with intentionality*.

STAYING CONNECTED REMOTELY

Because these interactions don't happen organically, it helps to build simple systems:

- Set reminders to check in with key stakeholders regularly.
- Schedule occasional one-on-ones that aren't tied to a specific project.
- Use tools or programs that encourage casual connections (like virtual coffee chats).

- Send a quick message, article, or note when something reminds you of someone.
- Continue small gestures—notes, gifts, or follow-ups—that show you're paying attention.

The goal is to create consistency. When you build a rhythm, these interactions become natural, even in a remote setting.

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF DIFFERENT MOMENTS

With remote work, you're not limited to the structure of the typical office day. I've found that some of the best relationship-building conversations happen outside of typical meeting schedules. Late Friday afternoons, for example, can be surprisingly effective. By then, many leaders are coming out of back-to-back meetings and are more relaxed and open to conversation. A casual one-on-one at that time often leads to more genuine, productive discussions than a tightly scheduled meeting earlier in the week. I'm not suggesting we all work after hours, but if you can find better moments to connect, it's worth taking advantage of them.[1]

Influence Is Built, Not Claimed

If there's one takeaway from this chapter, it's this: influence isn't something you claim in a meeting, it's something you build over time. It's built in the conversations before the meeting, the relationships you invest in, the trust you earn, and the people you bring along with you. These aren't "nice to have" skills. They are your influence system.

By the time you walk into a meeting, much of the outcome has already been shaped. You've already aligned with key stakeholders, built support, and made it easier for others to advocate for your work. The meeting itself is often just the moment where that alignment becomes visible.

But relationships alone aren't enough. A poorly designed meeting can still derail a great idea. Too little context, unclear expectations, the wrong people, or simply asking for the wrong kind of feedback at the wrong time can quickly undo the trust you've worked so hard to build.

That’s why the next step isn’t simply showing up. It’s intentionally designing the meeting itself. Just as we design interfaces that help users accomplish their goals, we can design meetings that help people make better decisions together. In the next chapter, we’ll look at how to intentionally design meetings that reduce friction, focus attention, and create the conditions for better design decisions.

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1 I realize I may be the only person recommending more Friday afternoon meetings. Please use this power responsibly.

[Part III]

Facilitation Is the Role

[8]

Designing the Design Meeting

Ah, meetings! Love them or hate them, they are part of how we get work done. Sure, some companies have so many meetings that it's unproductive. Others try hard to avoid them for all the right reasons. Call them conversations, jam sessions, or one-on-ones, if you want. Regardless of your context, people are meeting. Whether it's a conference room presentation, a remote design review, or a quick chat, the principles are the same.

Think about it the way you might design an interface. Getting users to complete a task depends partly on their available brain capacity: their *cognitive load*. The more clutter, options, or roadblocks we put in front of them, the more difficult it is to complete the task. It's the same when meeting with stakeholders. We should remove clutter, distractions, and unnecessary friction so our stakeholders' brains are freed to focus on the primary task of the meeting: supporting our design decisions.

In other words, we need to design our meetings as intentionally as we design our products. An articulate designer doesn't just think about what they're going to say. They think about the experience they're creating for everyone in the room.

If an executive is distracted by an outdated mockup, isn't sure what feedback you're looking for, or just can't get their head out of their last meeting, it will be much more difficult to get support. We don't want to just have a meeting but, to make it productive, valuable, and successful.

Like any good user experience, a good meeting should be easy to follow and focused on the outcome.
This chapter looks at how to define the right outcomes, set appropriate context, use inclusive techniques, optimize for memory, and remove distractions from the conversation. We want to design meetings that reduce cognitive load for our stakeholders, our team, and ourselves.

Defining the Outcome

Before you think about the agenda, the slides, or even who needs to be in the room, start with a simpler question: *what is this meeting supposed to accomplish?*
It sounds obvious, yet it's exactly where most meetings break down. We schedule time, gather people, and start talking without clearly defining what success looks like. As a result, the meeting drifts, conversations go in circles, and people leave with different interpretations of what just happened. Then, we schedule another meeting to fix the first one.
Not all meetings are the same, and treating them like they are is one of the fastest ways to make them ineffective. A decision meeting should feel very different from a feedback session. An alignment meeting is not the same as a working session.
At a high level, most design meetings have one of four primary outcomes:

Decision

We need to choose a direction and move forward.

Alignment

We're making sure everyone understands the current state and context.

Feedback

We're gathering input to improve the work.

Collaboration

We're working together to generate or refine ideas.

Each of these has a different purpose, a different level of participation, and a different definition of success. If you're not explicit about the outcome, people will default to their own understanding of the meeting. Some will try to give feedback when you need a decision. Others will debate when

you're just trying to share context. That mismatch is what creates friction, slows things down, and makes things feel unproductive.

In fact, I've found that many stakeholders believe they're expected to give feedback every time they see a design. I've watched people spend an entire meeting searching for something—anything—to comment on because they assumed that was why we invited them. Without clear expectations, they may begin commenting on everything they notice, even if those decisions have already been made. What started as a conversation to align on one small aspect of the design can quickly unravel into a discussion about the entire interface.

So before anything else, define the outcome. What kind of meeting is this? Do you need feedback or not? What should be different when it's over? *How will you know it was successful?* Once you're clear on that, everything else, the agenda, the structure, even the conversation becomes much easier to design.

Setting the Context

Once you've defined the outcome, the next step is to make that outcome clear to everyone by setting the context at the beginning of the meeting. Start with a quick reminder of the goal for this project or design, where you are in the process, and what kind of input you're looking for. This helps people calibrate how they should participate. A feedback session should invite critique. A decision meeting should focus on moving forward. An alignment meeting should prioritize clarity over debate.

Just as important, be explicit about what the meeting is not. In most cases, you don't want to open the floor for unlimited ideas or spontaneous redesign. The point is to get the right level of input so you can move forward with confidence and support. When people understand the context, they're far more likely to engage in the way the meeting actually needs.

The challenge, of course, is knowing how much context to provide. Too little, and people struggle to follow the discussion. Too much, and you lose the room before the conversation even begins. Finding that balance takes discernment because it requires understanding what your audience already knows and what they need to contribute at the right level.

Executives spend much of their day context-switching between meetings. While we've been immersed in this problem for days or weeks, they may

not have thought about it since the last review. That mental gap isn't a failure of attention. It's a natural consequence of their role. By spending just three to five minutes reestablishing the context, you can dramatically improve the quality of the conversation that follows.

Here are a few ways you can quickly bring them up to speed:

State the goal for the meeting

Begin by sharing why everyone was brought together. Whether it's to make decisions, get alignment, solicit feedback, or collaborate on ideas.

State the goal for the project

Next, remind them of the goal of the project or design. This is the problem you're solving or the outcome you're trying to achieve, ideally tied to a business metric or clear objective. It may be your answer to the question, *What problem does this solve?*

Summarize the last meeting

Remind them what was discussed, what decisions were made, or what changed. This can be quick, but it helps everyone pick up where you left off.

Show where you are in the process or timeline

A simple, visual timeline works well. Highlight your current stage so stakeholders understand the level of fidelity and what kind of thinking they're looking at.

Specify the inputs or feedback you need

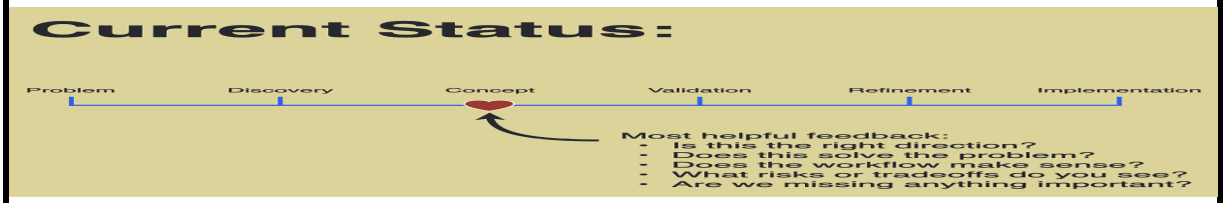
Tell them what feedback is helpful right now—and what's not. This keeps the conversation focused and prevents premature or unproductive critique.

State the goal, again

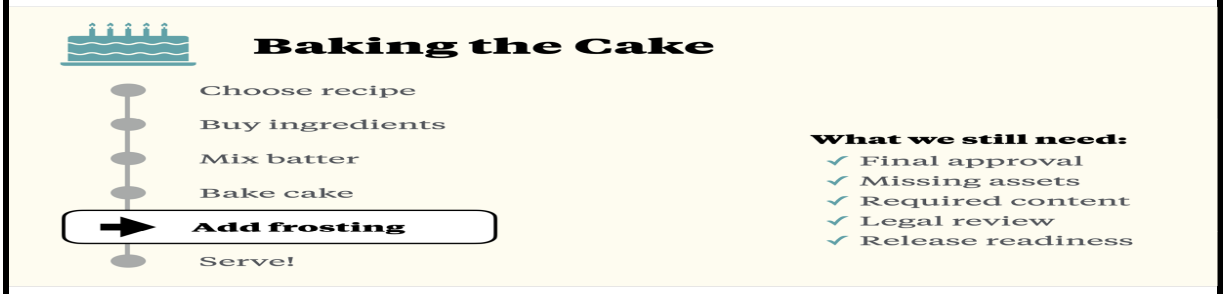
Finally, before you end, plan to restate the goal. It's a simple move, but it keeps everyone aligned and prevents the discussion from drifting away from the problem you're trying to solve.

Setting the context doesn't have to be time-consuming. It can be done in a few short sentences or with a single slide. For less formal design reviews, I try to at least make myself a few bullets as talking points to cover these.

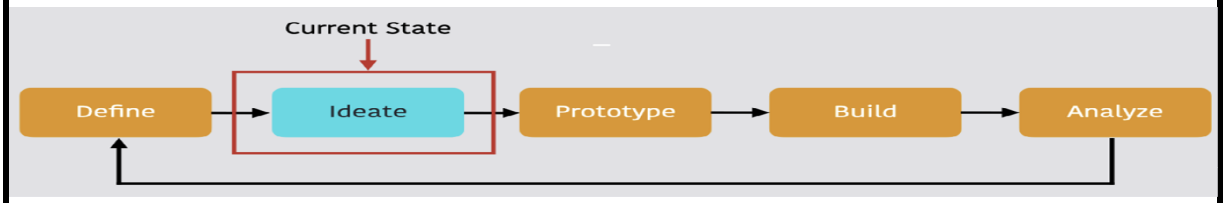
For official presentations involving more people, I may have as many as three slides dedicated to this. The priority is making sure the people I'm talking with understand why we're here so we can have a productive conversation.



Showing a horizontal timeline of where you are in the process is very helpful at setting the context of the conversation.



One team told me they use the metaphor of baking a cake to help their stakeholders know where they are in the process.



It doesn't have to be linear. Create an image that best matches your own team's process to help people know where you're at.

CALENDAR INVITES FOR CONTEXT

Another way to set context for stakeholders is using the calendar invitation's title and description. Imagine your stakeholder's calendar, filled with invitations bearing their own name or "Design Review"—you don't want them showing up and immediately asking, "What is this meeting about?" The calendar invitation should help them know what to expect.

Instead, include your own name or team name plus the name of the product, project, or part of the interface you're presenting. You also want

to convey the content of the meeting without implying the purpose is solely for them to give feedback.
For example, I will send calendar invitations like these:

- Tom Greever, Case Study UX
- Home Services + Concierge Design
- UX Research: Search Insights
- Homepage Content, UX Team

I find that words like review, sync, demo, feedback, or discussion are unnecessary because they're implied—like naming it "meeting." Calling something "Design Review Meeting" tells me approximately nothing. If stakeholders are meeting with a design team, they already assume the session involves some version of these. Avoid the urge to include these descriptors.
Lastly, include some helpful information in the body of the invitation too. An executive summary of what will be discussed and perhaps links to other documents or design assets. That way, when they're preparing for their upcoming day, they have everything they need from us right there and don't have to go searching for it. These small things can make a big difference in ensuring that people are mentally prepared to participate.

Designing for Inclusion

But true preparation isn't just about setting a calendar agenda; it's also about considering who is in the room. When we design products, we already understand that accessibility isn't just about edge cases: it improves the experience for everyone. The same is true in meetings. People process information differently. Some think out loud. Others need time to reflect. Some are comfortable speaking up immediately. Others won't say anything unless they're given space to do so.
If your meeting only works for the most vocal people in the room, you're not getting the best input; you're getting the loudest input.

MULTIPLE WAYS TO CONTRIBUTE

Designing for inclusion is about recognizing that different people engage in different ways and creating a structure that allows more of those

perspectives to surface. When you do that, the quality of your decisions improves.

I've seen this play out in simple ways. In one meeting, I added a BINGO-style activity just to make things more engaging. Afterward, several people told me it was the first time they felt like they could stay focused and actually participate. That wasn't my intent, but it revealed something important. Small changes in how we structure meetings can have a disproportionate impact on how people experience them.

One of the most effective ways to design for inclusion is to provide multiple ways to contribute. Not everyone is going to jump into a live discussion and that's OK. Give people alternatives:

- A shared doc or whiteboard where they can add thoughts silently
- Give everyone time to write before speaking
- Round-robin input so everyone has a chance to contribute

This creates space for better thinking. When only a few people dominate the conversation, you miss out on ideas that might have changed the outcome.

ASSIGNING ROLES

It also helps to be clear about roles. In many meetings, only a small number of people are actually there to give feedback or make decisions. Everyone else is there to observe, learn, or support. If you don't make that explicit, the meeting becomes a free-for-all. People talk over each other, offer opinions that aren't needed, and the conversation drifts.

Assigning roles, like facilitator, decision-maker, contributor, notetaker, or observer, sets expectations and keeps the meeting focused. You can use frameworks like RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed), but even a simple conversation about who is making the decision, who is providing input, and who is there to listen can dramatically improve the quality of the discussion. In some cases, that means telling people they're there to listen, not to weigh in. That clarity makes the meeting better for everyone.

Once you understand those roles, you may realize that not everyone needs to be in the same meeting at all. Sometimes I'll work with key stakeholders

individually to understand their concerns then bring those perspectives into a smaller decision-making group. Smaller conversations can give people more room to speak candidly while making the final discussion easier to facilitate. A room full of everyone who might possibly have an opinion is rarely the easiest place to make a good decision.

MIXED METHODS

Finally, consider the different ways people engage with the meeting. Some people process information better visually, others through conversation or writing. Using a mix of formats—visuals, discussion, written input, chat—gives people more ways to follow along and contribute.

Even something as simple as keeping the agenda visible while you talk can help people stay oriented. And not everyone will respond in real time, so create opportunities for follow-up through async feedback or additional conversations.

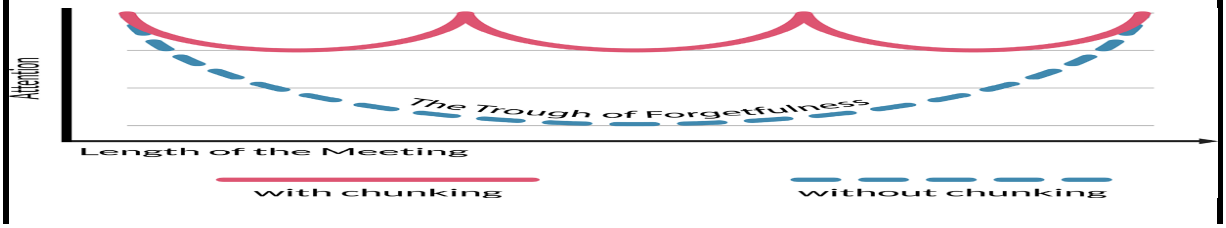
These methods make meetings more inclusive, but they have another benefit too: presenting information in different ways also makes it easier to remember. We'll come back to that shortly.

Optimizing for Memory

Designing a better meeting also means understanding how our brains work and optimizing to make sure our stakeholders remember what we discussed. Here are a few simple concepts we can keep in mind.

PRIMACY AND RECENCY

The psychological principles of primacy and recency in listening and memory tell us that people are more likely to remember the first and last things we say. Recall tends to drop somewhere in the middle.[1] We can use this to our advantage by breaking up our content into meaningful (smaller) chunks and creating distinct transitions between each part. That makes it more likely that our stakeholders will remember more of the conversation because it registers as several mini conversations instead of one long meeting.



If your presentation is one long lecture (in blue), it's difficult for people to pay attention. When you break up your content (in red), you create more opportunities for people to remember.

A common way of doing this is to create distinct agenda items and make clear decisions for each one, verbally expressing when it's time to move on. However, I've found these can still run together. Creating additional visual cues or breaking the monotony with movement can help too. You could change the background color of your slides when you move from one part to the next. The difference creates a clear visual separation. You could also take a short break, ask an ice-breaker question, or pass it off to a different person. There are lots of ways to create a clear transition between each agenda item.



I've used tabbed interfaces and dot navigation in my slides to help people understand where we are in the presentation, as well as make a clear distinction between each part or decision.

REPETITION

People are also more likely to remember something that's been repeated. This universal understanding in marketing and advertising is useful for our stakeholder conversations too. What's the most important thing you want them to remember? The goal or problem we're trying to solve and the decision we made. So plan to repeat these (verbally or visually on screen) at least three times throughout the conversation. *Ahem!* People are more likely to remember something that's been repeated![2]

SURPRISE

Finally, people are more likely to remember something they weren't expecting. If you can introduce an element into your meeting that breaks the pattern, it sticks. The challenge, of course, is that most business meetings are designed to be predictable. Slides, updates, discussion. Repeat.

A small moment of surprise—used intentionally—can cut through that and make your key points more memorable. The purpose isn't to be entertaining for its own sake. It's to help people remember what matters. There are a lot of ways to do this, some more subtle than others:

Use contrast

Show an intentionally bad design to make a point or an over-the-top, visionary concept you'd never actually ship. Both extremes get attention and clarify your thinking.

Memes

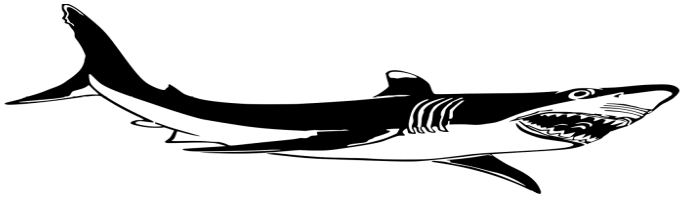
Drop in something unexpected but relevant, like a well-placed meme. It's low effort, easy to do, and often more effective than another slide of text.

Change the format

I've seen someone run a meeting like a comic book, framing the user as the hero and walking through the experience as a story. It was still a design review, but the format made it far more engaging and memorable.

I've experimented with this in my own ways:

- Using images of kittens alongside key data or objectives just to break the monotony
- Running a meeting like a quiz show, where stakeholders chose the category that determined what we discussed
- Taping "fortune cookie" versions of the agenda items under chairs and asking people to read them aloud at the start to determine the order



I bet you weren't expecting to see a shark in this book, but I put it here to remind you that the element of surprise is very effective.[3]

The challenge is making sure the surprise doesn't become a distraction. Its purpose is to break the pattern and magnify your message, not derail the meeting. As we'll see later, part of our job is to *remove* distractions. So find the right balance of keeping people engaged with your content without causing unnecessary distractions that derail the meeting.

REINFORCEMENT

The same mix of formats that makes a meeting more inclusive can also make it more memorable. If you want people to remember what you discussed, don't rely on a single way of communicating it. Reinforce the important ideas in different ways: explain them out loud, show them visually, and capture them in writing.

You've probably already seen this in practice. I've worked with executives who preferred everything in a structured document with headers and bullet points. Others responded far better to slide decks, even in informal conversations. Same content, different format, completely different level of engagement. The point isn't to find the one perfect format. It's to give your message multiple ways to land for different people.

Removing Distractions

Staying focused in a design meeting is harder than it should be. Visual design invites commentary, and people will often latch onto the first thing that catches their attention, even if it has nothing to do with the purpose of the meeting. If you're not careful, a single detail can derail the entire conversation.

Your job is to remove anything that might pull attention away from the real problem. That includes placeholder content, unfinished details, or anything that invites unnecessary critique. People don't ignore these things just because you tell them to. If it's there, they're apt to react to it.

I've seen this happen in all kinds of ways:

- A stakeholder fixates on a placeholder image that happens to be from a competitor.
- Someone gets hung up on lorem ipsum and tries to interpret it.
- A rough icon or misaligned layout becomes the focus instead of the concept.

In one case, I had a client who kept reacting to how misaligned some of the elements of my design were. They weren't wrong, the design was intentionally scrappy. But, it distracted them enough that they started suggesting major changes to make things feel more "balanced." I paused, cleaned up a few things, and almost immediately their feedback shifted to the actual design decisions.

That's the tradeoff: spending a little more time preparing your work can save a lot of time in the meeting. If the same distraction comes up more than once, it's not their fault—it's yours. Remove it and keep the meeting focused.



You can download a template and worksheet for planning your design meetings on my website at *http://tomgreever.com/resources*.

In the next chapter, we're going to shift from designing the meeting to running it. At this point, you've put the structure in place. You've clarified the outcome, set the context, and created an environment where people can actually engage. But none of that guarantees the meeting will go well. Because once people show up, things change. Opinions surface. Conversations go offtrack. The discussion doesn't always follow the plan. And in those moments, structure alone isn't enough. What matters is how you respond, how you guide the conversation, and how you keep things moving forward. You've got to be an effective facilitator.

1 Pharmaceutical companies take advantage of this in television commercials by putting their medical disclaimers right at the point where people tune out.

2 My editors initially flagged this as…too repetitive. True story!

3 "stensil" is licensed under CC0 1.0. Public domain. To view a copy of this license, visit *https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/*.

[9]

Being an Effective Facilitator

The way we think about our role in a design meeting shapes how we behave in it. Most designers think of their role in a design meeting as receiving feedback: presenting their work, taking criticism, defending decisions, or pushing back when they disagree. Some people compare it to a sales pitch where they're trying to convince stakeholders to "buy" their design. Other times, the language starts to sound almost violent: war, fighting, or battle, where ideas are challenged and someone wins while someone else loses. None of these are particularly helpful ways to think about it.

Instead, your role isn't to pitch, defend, or absorb feedback. *Your role is to facilitate a conversation about design solutions.* That means you're guiding the discussion toward something useful. Taking what people say—questions, concerns, half-formed ideas—and helping shape it into something clearer and more productive. You're not just taking notes and creating tasks. You're listening, interpreting, and moving the conversation forward. An articulate designer doesn't just explain their own thinking well; they help everyone in the room think more clearly together.

In this chapter, we'll look at how to do that well: guiding the conversation, anticipating how people might respond, preparing yourself for the discussion, and adapting your approach to different kinds of meetings.

Guiding the Flow of the Conversation

As the facilitator, your job is to guide where the conversation goes and how it unfolds. Meetings don't always fall apart because people disagree. Often, the conversation simply loses structure. Topics get mixed together. Someone jumps ahead. Another person circles back. Before long, you're debating details without alignment on the bigger picture.

Good facilitation is about sequencing

You decide what gets discussed first, what comes next, and when it's time to move on. Maybe you start with the problem before showing solutions. Maybe you walk through one concept at a time. Maybe you hold certain questions until later so they don't derail the discussion. These are small decisions, but they have a big impact on how clearly people think.

Good facilitation is also about directing attention

If you present everything at once, people will latch onto whatever catches their attention first, even if it's the least important detail. Instead, focus the conversation on what matters most, in the order that makes the most sense.

One of the most effective tools for doing that is asking questions. They can narrow the focus, open up new thinking, or redirect attention back to the goal. Instead of reacting to every comment, guide the discussion with questions like:

- "How does that impact the goal we're trying to achieve?"
- "What problem are we solving with that change?"
- "Is this something we need to decide now, or can we come back to it?"

These questions help the group stay grounded and move forward. You don't need to control every moment of the meeting. But you do need to guide it. Without that, the conversation will organize itself. And if you've been in enough design meetings, you already know how well that usually goes.

ANTICIPATING REACTIONS

Guiding the conversation becomes much easier when you have some idea where it might go. Part of that is anticipating how people will react to your designs. In previous chapters, we identified the people with influence over our projects and explored their values and motivations. When you combine that understanding with the perspective they bring to their role, you can make some pretty good guesses about how they'll respond.

The good news is that most people are fairly predictable. Spend enough time in design meetings with the same people and you start to know what's coming. You show a new concept and can practically hear the questions before anyone asks them. Use that to your advantage.

The manager who always asks about color will probably ask about color again. The developer who asks for analytics values data to support decisions. The executive who questions the placement of a call to action is thinking about conversion and business impact. What feels like a soft skill is actually a predictable pattern:

personality + role + past behavior = likely reactions

While not a *real* formula, this equation is reliable enough to help you be more prepared.

Once you have a sense of how people will respond, use that to shape how you run the meeting. Look at your designs and think intentionally about the flow of the conversation. Just as you design a user's path through an interface, you're designing how stakeholders move through the discussion. Match that flow to the people in the room. For each person, ask:

- What do they care about the most?
- What are their personal goals for this project?
- What do I already know they want or don't want?

Use those answers to guide how and when you bring topics into the conversation.

If you're unsure, ask. It's completely reasonable to check in with stakeholders ahead of time and understand what they hope to get out of the meeting. You can also use tools, like AI, to help you prepare—feeding in your designs along with your understanding of a stakeholder's role and priorities to generate likely reactions. It won't be perfect, but it's a useful

way to practice and sharpen your instincts in a low-risk way. You won't be able to predict every comment. It's more so to be ready for the ones that matter so you can guide the conversation instead of reacting to it.

WRITING DOWN QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS

Once you've considered how people might react, take the next step and write down the questions and concerns you expect to hear along with how you plan to respond. Until you're very comfortable responding in the moment, it's easy to lose track of your thoughts or miss an opportunity to guide the conversation effectively.

I still do this before important meetings. I'll make a quick list of the questions, concerns, and comments I think are likely to come up, and then jot down how I might respond. You don't need to map every objection to a specific person. Even a general list is enough to sharpen your thinking and make your responses feel more natural when those moments come up. These might show up as direct questions or more subtle comments during the meeting. Either way, preparing for them gives you a clearer path forward and helps you stay focused on the outcome you're trying to achieve.

Here are some examples of how you might write down anticipated questions:

HOME PAGE	PRODUCT PAGE
• Why did we remove one of the CTAs? • Does the carousel advance automatically? (Justin) • The utility navigation is too crowded. (Kristen) • What happened to the Recommended Item feed? • We can't "hide" the Join button under the menu. (Mark)	• Why isn't the image larger like we discussed? • Do we have to use two different buttons? Can we get the CTA above the fold? • Why are Reviews further down on the page? • The fixed navigation interaction should automatically add the item to cart. (Kristen) • This flow has more complex use cases than I think you've considered. (Mark)

CREATING ALTERNATIVES

Part of anticipating reactions is considering the alternatives stakeholders may suggest or that you've already explored. As we discussed earlier, one of the key questions you need to answer is: *Why is this better than the alternative?*

Many designers avoid alternatives because they worry stakeholders will prefer the "wrong" option. But hiding alternatives doesn't solve that problem. Someone may suggest another approach in the meeting, point to something a competitor does, or pull out their phone and say, "Why can't we do it this way?" Alternatives will find their way into the conversation whether you're prepared for them or not.

And ultimately, we want our recommendation to hold up even after stakeholders have considered the alternatives. If another option seems better to them, that tells us something important. Maybe we haven't understood their needs well enough. Maybe our recommendation isn't actually as strong as we thought. Or maybe we haven't clearly explained why the tradeoffs make our approach better. None of those problems are solved by keeping the alternatives out of sight.

You can't protect people from bad ideas. What you *can* do is prepare them to understand good ones.

That doesn't mean you need to present every alternative by default. Lead with the solution you recommend and tell the story of how you arrived there. But have alternatives ready when they help demonstrate your thinking, compare tradeoffs, or respond to a direction you expect someone to suggest. The goal is to be confident that if those alternatives enter the conversation, you can explain why your recommendation is still the strongest choice.

These alternatives don't need to be fully polished. Simple variations or lightweight mockups are often enough. If you know someone will question a specific detail—like an icon, layout, or interaction—have a few options ready. If a previous meeting resulted in a direction you didn't fully agree with, bring that version alongside alternatives that better address the problem.

AI makes this much easier than it used to be. You can quickly generate variations, explore different directions, and pressure-test your thinking before the meeting. And since stakeholders may be doing the same, it's increasingly important to have done this thinking yourself. You want to be

sure you understand the alternatives well enough that you're ready when they come up.

Creating alternatives gives you a stronger foundation for the conversation. You've explored the possibilities, considered the tradeoffs, and arrived at a recommendation you can stand behind—even when someone asks, "But what about this?"

PREPARING DATA AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

Just as you prepare for objections and alternatives, you should also prepare the data and research that support your decisions: analytics, usability findings, user testing results, or anything else that informs your work. It's one thing to make a recommendation. It's another to show that it's grounded in evidence.

That said, having data and using data are not the same thing. In most cases, it's enough to let stakeholders know your decisions are informed by research, while giving a brief summary of what you've learned. You don't need to lead with charts and reports. In fact, doing so too early can shut down the conversation.

People may even defer to the data instead of engaging with the problem: *"If that's what the data says, then that's what we should do."* Conversation over. That might feel like a win, but it isn't necessarily good facilitation. When thoughtful input is needed, data shouldn't become an escape hatch that ends the conversation prematurely.

At the same time, data and research aren't a silver bullet. It can be challenged, dismissed, or misunderstood. You may hear questions about methodology, sample size, or relevance. And in some cases, a confident opinion in the room may carry as much weight as your research findings. That's why the goal is to be prepared, not dependent.

Have the insights ready. Know how it supports your decisions. Be able to bring it into the conversation when needed, especially when there's disagreement or skepticism. But don't rely on it to do all the work for you.

Preparation in this context is about range. You're anticipating reactions, preparing alternatives, and backing your decisions with evidence. But thinking through these things in your head will only get you so far. Before an important meeting, I find it helps to actually hear myself say them.

Practicing Out Loud

One of the best ways to become more articulate is simply to practice out loud. Run through what you want to cover, anticipate questions, and say your responses as if people were already there. Hearing your words is very different from thinking them. You'll quickly notice what feels unclear, repetitive, or awkward and can fix it before the meeting.

I know this can feel a little silly. You're essentially talking to yourself. But it works. I've spent countless hours pacing my office, presenting to a picture on the wall, or answering questions from imaginary stakeholders. I've done it while driving, jogging, and even standing in the corner of an airport waiting for a flight. To an outside observer, I probably looked completely absurd.[1] But it's one of the only ways to really hear how your logic sounds.

Practicing also reduces your cognitive load. The more familiar you are with what you want to say, the more mental space you'll have to listen and respond in the moment. A big presentation might need multiple run-throughs, while a smaller meeting might only need a quick pass. Think of it as the usability test of being articulate: you get to run through everything and make sure it works before the real conversation.

And if other people are presenting or supporting you, take a few minutes to practice together. Make sure everyone knows the important points and when they may need to jump in.

If you lead other designers, these practice sessions are also an opportunity to help them develop their own articulation skills. Rather than throwing someone into the deep end, gradually reduce the support: I do, you watch. We practice together. You practice, I give feedback. Then you do it for real, and we talk about it afterward.

Start by rehearsing together in a low-risk setting. Let them practice presenting a section of the work or responding to questions you expect stakeholders to ask. As their confidence grows, give them opportunities to do the same thing in real meetings. Articulation improves through experience, and part of being a leader is creating the right experiences for people to learn.

Designing in Real Time

Sometimes a design meeting turns into a design session. You came prepared to present your work, and suddenly someone says, "Can we just

sketch this out?" Before you know it, you're at a whiteboard and the meeting itself becomes the design tool. I've been in plenty of meetings where this happened without anyone actually deciding that's what we were going to do.

Working through ideas together can create alignment, surface assumptions, and give stakeholders a sense of ownership. It's especially useful when the problem is still being defined or the team is struggling to align. But without structure, it can quickly turn into a collection of suggestions rather than a clear direction.

Your job is still to facilitate. Restate the problem before anyone starts drawing, narrow the conversation to one idea at a time, or suggest scheduling a separate session if the discussion needs more space. If you've already come with a well-considered recommendation, present your thinking first so the conversation has a foundation.

You don't have to follow every suggestion or design everything in the moment. The idea is to acknowledge the input, guide the exploration, and make sure the conversation leads somewhere useful.

Facilitating Across Environments

Everything we've discussed so far applies regardless of where the conversation happens. But I bet you've been picturing in-person meetings: people in a room, standing around a screen or a whiteboard. As we saw in Chapter 7, remote work doesn't fundamentally change the principles, but it does require us to be more intentional about how we apply them. The same is true of facilitation.

Your job is still guiding the conversation toward alignment and decisions. What changes is the environment. Remote meetings make attention and participation more difficult, while async conversations make context harder to maintain. Both require us to be more intentional about how we facilitate.

REMOTE FACILITATION

Remote facilitation requires more intention—not a different skill set, just a more deliberate application:

First, engagement has to be created, not assumed

> It's easy to half pay attention on a video call, so give people something to do. Use a whiteboard, ask for reactions in chat, or have people contribute to a shared document. You don't need to turn the meeting

into a game, but it helps to make participation visible and expected.

Second, participation has to be invited

I don't love putting people on the spot, but in remote meetings I find myself doing it more often. We've all been on calls where three people do 90% of the talking while everyone else becomes a row of silent rectangles. If I know someone has an important perspective, I'll invite them in: "Hey, I'd love to hear your take on this." It's always OK for them to pass, but I want to make sure the conversation isn't limited to the most vocal people.

Third, attention has to be guided

Your visuals carry more weight. What's on your screen isn't just supporting the conversation, it *is* the conversation. Be intentional about what you show: a few slides to reinforce the goal, a shared document, or a clear view of the design itself. Without a shared focal point, the conversation drifts more easily.

In remote facilitation, the environment doesn't do this work for you, so you have to be more deliberate about engagement, participation, and attention.

ASYNC FACILITATION

I generally recommend avoiding asynchronous design discussions with stakeholders outside your immediate working circle. When you remove the context, goals, and framing from a conversation, it becomes easier for people to fixate on the wrong details. A screenshot without explanation invites a knee-jerk reaction rather than a thoughtful discussion.

With close collaborators—other designers, product managers, engineers—async can work just fine because you've built shared context over time.

The risk also depends on the decision. A quick gut check on a button might be fine, while larger, more strategic discussions are much harder to manage asynchronously.

One way to think about this is as a spectrum:

- DM or email → lowest context, highest risk
- Recorded video → higher context, more control
- Live conversation → highest context, best for complex discussion

As the facilitator, understand where you are on that spectrum and adjust accordingly.

Design-by-DM

One of the most common forms of async communication is design-by-DM. It's easy, fast, and often convenient—but it comes with the same risks as any low-context approach. Feedback gets buried in threads, detached from the work, and inaccessible to others. I've watched a single screenshot turn into three different threads, two competing solutions, and a decision nobody could find the next day. Facilitating in a text channel can feel like acting as a digital traffic cop.

If you're going to work this way—and sometimes you have to—add some structure. Provide context, link to the full design instead of a screenshot, and ask specific questions. Whenever possible, move the conversation into the design file or a shared document so the details are visible and preserved.

And if it starts to break down, stop. Take the conversation somewhere else or find time to meet. The question isn't whether design-by-DM is possible; it's whether it's helping you lead the conversation.

Choosing async when it works

That said, sometimes async is simply more practical. Someone is traveling, in back-to-back meetings, or you just need a quick signal before moving forward. And sometimes it's actually better: not everyone responds well in the moment, and giving people time to think can lead to better input.

As trust and shared context build, async becomes easier too and may eventually become a primary way of working. The decision comes down to the person, the context they already have, and the stakes if something is misunderstood.

Recording walkthrough videos

One of the most effective forms of async communication is prerecorded walkthrough videos. Instead of sending designs with a written explanation, record a short video where you walk through your designs as if you were presenting them live. Explain the goal, your decisions, and what kind of input you're looking for.

This does two important things:

First, it preserves your reasoning

People can hear how you're thinking and understand how the pieces fit together, which is difficult to convey through static images alone.

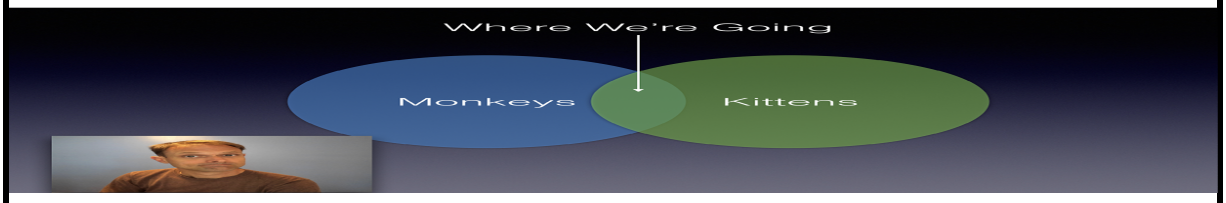
Second, it changes how people respond

A video requires more intentional viewing. People are less likely to react casually and more likely to wait until they can give it proper attention.

Not every decision needs a video, but when the stakes are higher or the design is more complex, it gives you more control over an asynchronous conversation.

Here are a few tips for making your videos effective:

- Write a short script so you know what to say, but don't sound like you're reading.
- Keep it short. Two and a half minutes is the perfect length, I've found. As much as five minutes might be necessary, but try to keep it as short as possible.
- Include a picture-in-picture of your webcam so stakeholders can read your facial expressions.
- Don't forget to smile! It will feel super awkward, but—trust me—the smile looks natural for recipients. Otherwise, you might look disinterested or overly serious.



I wasn't able to use a screenshot from a real work video, but you get the idea.

Facilitating a design meeting is about guiding how people think about the work. Everything in this chapter points back to that idea. You prepare so you're not reacting in the moment. You anticipate reactions so you're not

surprised by them. You bring alternatives and data so the conversation has somewhere to go. And you adapt to the environment, so people can engage in a meaningful way.

Because no matter how the meeting is structured, or what tools you use, the outcome depends on how well the conversation is led. When you approach meetings this way, you're doing the work of an articulate designer. You're not just sharing designs; you're helping people understand them, evaluate them, and ultimately support the right decisions.
Once the conversation has been guided toward something useful, the next question is what to do with the feedback we've gathered. In the next chapter, we'll look at how to process that feedback, understand what's behind it, and use our expertise to turn it into something more valuable.

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1 Using ear buds and holding my phone has made this more socially acceptable.

[10]

Processing Feedback and Adding Value

An important realization about stakeholder feedback is that people routinely spot problems but describe solutions. Even when we've designed the meeting well, asked the right questions, and created the conditions for productive conversations, people will naturally respond with comments like "Move this button over there" or "Make this bigger." Most stakeholders are not intentionally trying to create bad experiences. They're trying to solve a problem the best way they know how. They recognize that something feels confusing, risky, or unclear, and they respond by telling you how to fix it. But if they aren't looking at the entire system, they may focus on one piece of the experience without fully understanding how it affects the larger system. And that's fine. That's not their job. That's our job.

As articulate designers, our role is not to simply take stakeholder requests and turn them into screens. Our role is to understand the deeper problem underlying what people are asking for and then connect all the pieces into something that actually works. That's how we add value.

It's easy to forget this because so much of our work revolves around deliverables. We spend our time creating mockups and flow charts, so naturally, we see those outputs as the way we provide value. It feels like the deliverables themselves are the job. And to some extent, they are. Those artifacts matter. Without them, we probably wouldn't be doing our jobs. But the longer I've worked in design, the more I've realized that the

outputs themselves are only part of the picture. Our real value comes from understanding how the systems work together, how business and customer needs intersect, and how all the moving parts need to align to create the right experience.

I've often likened it to solving a Rubik's Cube because what usually happens is someone comes along and says, "I want this side to be red! If you just turn this here, then it will be red." And our job is to be so attuned to all the other parts and pieces that we're able to respond, "Yes! I love red! I want that side to be red too, but when I turn this here, it changes things over there, and we've got to solve for the whole cube."

That's the difference between simply reacting to feedback and actually processing it. Stakeholders often see one side of the cube. Designers have to solve the whole thing.

And honestly, this has only become more obvious as generative AI continues to improve. Today, stakeholders might arrive with designs generated by AI. That changes the starting point of the conversation. Instead of reacting to abstract ideas, we're increasingly asked to evaluate, refine, and build on concrete proposals. Our value isn't in deciding whether an AI-generated design looks good. It's in understanding the problem behind it, identifying what works and what doesn't, and guiding the conversation toward a solution that fits the entire system.

In this chapter, we'll look at some techniques that will help you process feedback more effectively, uncover the real problems your stakeholders are trying to solve, and respond in ways that add more value to the conversation.

Listening to Understand

One of the simplest ways to improve how we process feedback is to become better listeners. Listening isn't just waiting for the other person to stop speaking so we can begin our response. We need to understand what stakeholders are actually trying to communicate before deciding how to respond.

An articulate response requires that we use skills such as listening without interrupting, hearing what they're not saying, uncovering the actual problem they're trying to solve, asking questions, repeating or rephrasing what was said, and then pausing before moving on. Ultimately, we want to

be sure we understand exactly what they're saying so that we can meaningfully process their feedback and add value to the conversation.

LETTING THEM TALK

It's important that we give our stakeholders the time and space they need to express their perspective. Allow them to say what they need to and don't cut them off. People sometimes need room to talk through what they're thinking without feeling rushed.

This requires a delicate balance since you also don't want the meeting to go offtrack, *especially* if they're saying things you know to be incorrect or uninformed. It can be difficult to hear someone talk about your work without jumping in, but don't stop them. Letting them finish is often to your advantage.

Why? Some people may want to sound smart. It could be that there are other people in the room they're trying to influence. You never know what sort of politics or pressures are at play. Other people may be verbal processors, and talking through it helps them understand it more clearly. Because design can be difficult to discuss, stakeholders may gain a better understanding simply by talking through it. They might even explain your design to themselves without you having to say a word. Whatever the reason, allow your stakeholders to say what they need to before moving on.

Letting them talk has a few benefits:

They will make themselves more clear

As people talk, they naturally refine and rephrase their thoughts, often becoming more clear about what they actually mean as they speak.

It gives them confidence that they were understood

Giving stakeholders the space to fully express themselves helps them feel confident that their perspective was heard and understood correctly.

It demonstrates that you value what they're saying

Allowing people to fully explain themselves communicates that you're listening carefully and value their perspective, which builds trust and openness in the conversation.

While they talk, listen carefully for the specific words they use to describe your designs, especially the terminology they seem most comfortable with.

Part of listening is identifying their vocabulary so you can use it when responding. It's difficult to build alignment if you're speaking different languages, so meet them where they are while gradually helping them adopt more useful design terminology over time.

Overall, allowing stakeholders to talk freely creates an atmosphere where people know they can express themselves, be heard, and share the valuable perspective you need to be effective.

HEARING WHAT ISN'T BEING SAID

Not everything our stakeholders say will be immediately clear. Sometimes we need to look deeper than their actual words to understand what they really mean. Another important part of listening is hearing what isn't being said. What's the subtext? What's the elephant in the room no one wants to mention? Often, what people say and what they mean are two different things.

This is especially important in design because it can be subjective and people aren't always sure how to express themselves. On top of that, stakeholders know this is something you created. It's your work. Because of that, some may communicate concerns indirectly rather than openly disagreeing. Often, this comes in the form of questions rather than criticism. These factors can make it difficult to discern what's actually being said.

"Oh, that's interesting. Why did you do it this way?" The subtext is that they think you made the wrong choice. In fact, when someone uses the word "interesting," it's likely they disagree.[1]

As I've mentioned before, there are always dynamics in meetings that we aren't aware of. People rarely arrive as a blank slate. They carry with them the conversations they just had, the pressures they're under, and the goals they're being measured against. Those things shape the way they see our work, often without them realizing it.

I remember presenting a workflow that our team had spent weeks refining. During the review, an executive became fixated on a single call to action. He wanted it larger, brighter, and in a different location. At first, I assumed we were discussing a legitimate usability problem. But after asking a few questions, I realized he had just come from another meeting where the team was discussing declining conversion rates. Conversion had become

the lens through which he was evaluating everything he saw. The button wasn't really the problem. It was simply the most visible thing he could point to. Once we shifted the conversation to the broader customer journey and the factors affecting conversion, the discussion became much more productive.

Another time, a product manager was questioning my team's designs late in a project. They seemed to disagree with several of our decisions, even suggesting that users didn't really need a feature our research strongly supported. It felt like we were simply disagreeing, but rather than defend the design, I asked, "*What problem are you trying to solve by removing this?*" That's when they explained that leadership had just moved the release date forward. Suddenly, everything made sense. We weren't really debating the design at all. We were trying to solve a scope problem. Once we understood that, the conversation shifted from defending individual features to discussing priorities and tradeoffs.

The pressures people are under can make it difficult for them to connect the feedback they're giving with the underlying concern that's driving it, so part of our job is learning to hear what they aren't directly saying.

GUIDING WITH QUESTIONS

Sometimes, letting stakeholders talk and reading between the lines still isn't enough to fully understand their feedback. We need to pull the right words out of them to better understand the problem they're trying to solve. Just like the previous chapter, that means guiding the conversation with thoughtful questions.

In fact, the three questions from Chapter 2 work well here too:

- What problem does it solve?
- How does it affect the user?
- Why is it better than the alternative?

Framed differently for our stakeholders, we might ask:

- What problem are you trying to solve? If it's unclear what stakeholders are trying to accomplish, ask them directly.

- How will this affect our goals or customers? This encourages stakeholders to connect their suggestions back to business goals and user experience.
- What are the benefits (or tradeoffs) of doing it this way? This helps stakeholders better frame their reasoning and often reveals why they believe their approach is better.

I've also found it helpful to ask for examples of other apps or websites that do what they're proposing:

- Where have you seen this before? Reference material can reveal the patterns, assumptions, or experiences influencing their thinking.

Asking clarifying questions like these will help guide the conversation to a place where you can better understand the feedback and respond more effectively. You want to uncover their thinking, not ask pointed questions that make people feel defensive or imply that you disagree.

REPEAT AND REPHRASE

Asking good questions helps stakeholders feel heard and understood, but listening alone isn't enough. We also need to make sure we're speaking the same language. If we aren't aligned on the vocabulary we use to describe design problems, there will inevitably be confusion, misunderstanding, and missed expectations.

Rephrase: Convert "likes" to "works"

One technique I've found to be very effective is something I call "converting likes into works"—that is, to help them move from expressing their personal preferences (what they like or don't like) to framing their feedback in terms of what works or doesn't work about the design.

It's too easy for someone to say they simply don't like something. A subjective response leaves us no way to address our stakeholders' concerns, since we can't tell them their opinion is incorrect. We can only have a different opinion.

Instead, listen for opportunities to convert "likes" into "works." Rephrase their feedback in terms of effectiveness instead of preference. You might

also consider following up with a question to confirm that's what they intended to communicate or to seek additional clarification.

For example, "I understand that you want us to move that UI element over there, but why doesn't it work to have it over here?" When people hear their concerns rephrased inside a frame of effectiveness, they often recognize that they're only expressing a personal preference. You might still have to manage their request, but now the conversation is about solving the problem, not defending opinions.

Repeat: What I hear you saying

Another effective technique is to repeat back what stakeholders said using words that are more relevant to a discussion of design and UX. We can't expect everyone to know the "right" vocabulary to describe our work, so part of our job is to listen carefully and translate what they're saying into language that becomes common ground for the conversation.

Leading with the phrase "What I hear you saying..." is especially effective because it communicates that we're listening carefully and working to understand their perspective before responding.

Here's an example:

> **Stakeholder:** I don't like how the disabled buttons look. I have no idea why they don't work! We should add some help text or a tooltip or something.
>
> **Designer:** What I hear you saying is that you don't think a segmented control is the best choice in this context, because the user won't understand why the disabled options aren't available to them. Is that right?



Why aren't kittens available? Teaching stakeholders to call this a "segmented control" without talking down to them can be useful in moving toward a shared vocabulary.

Repeating what our stakeholders say using language that's more useful to the conversation helps create common ground without making people feel corrected or talked down to. The goal isn't to teach stakeholders design jargon. It's to gradually move everyone toward a shared vocabulary that makes the conversation more clear and productive.

Here are some examples of how you might reframe feedback in a way that introduces more useful design language naturally:

Stakeholder: This page feels really busy.

Designer: What I hear you saying is that there's too much competing for the user's attention. Where should we try to focus the user?

Stakeholder: We should make this button bigger.

Designer: What I hear you saying is that you're worried users won't notice the primary action. Is visibility the problem, or are you concerned about something else?

Stakeholder: Users are going to get lost here.

Designer: What I hear you saying is that the navigation doesn't provide enough orientation for users to understand where they are. Is that right?

In many ways, this is the real work. We aren't simply repeating feedback word for word—we're translating it into language that helps everyone better understand the problem.

THE ART OF THE PAUSE

One last technique is mastering the art of the pause. When you think your stakeholders are done talking, wait. Don't immediately jump in with your response. Instead, allow for a few seconds of silence, however awkward that might feel.

This can feel especially uncomfortable on video calls where delays make it difficult to tell whether someone is actually finished speaking. But it's worth the wait. If the silence is too awkward, you can create a gap by saying, "Let me think about that for a moment." Anyone will appreciate that you want to take the time to consider what they've said.

The pause serves a few important purposes:

First, it gives stakeholders space to keep thinking

People often pause, reconsider what they were trying to say, and then explain themselves more clearly. Give them room to keep going.

Second, it gives you time to process before reacting

Rather than becoming defensive or rushing into a response, you have a moment to consider what was said and decide how you want to respond.

Finally, pausing shows that you're taking their feedback seriously

Simply taking a moment to consider what they said helps people feel heard and demonstrates that their perspective matters.

By slowing down the room with intentional pauses, you transition the team out of a reactionary mindset and earn the space required to dig beneath the surface.

Uncovering the Real Problem

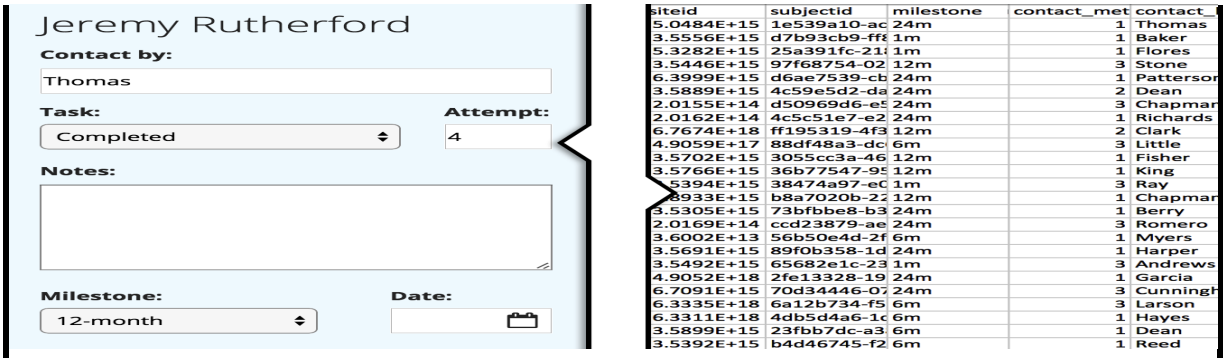
Ultimately, all of these techniques are serving the same purpose: helping you uncover the real problem your stakeholders are trying to solve.

It's easier for them to say "Move this button over there" than it is to recognize that the real issue is the relationship between the button and the surrounding content. Those solutions rarely come out of nowhere. They're usually inspired by something they've seen before, whether it's another product they use, a competitor's app, a prototype they built with AI, or an idea they encountered elsewhere.

That's why listening, asking questions, repeating and rephrasing, and even pausing are all so important. Together, they help us move past the surface-level request and better understand what stakeholders are actually trying to accomplish.

REORDERED INPUTS

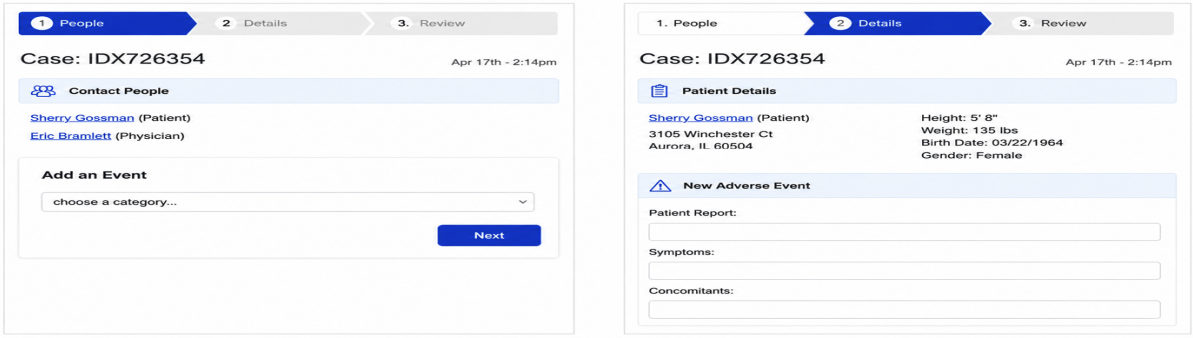
I once worked with a client who asked me to reorder several fields on a form. At first, it sounded like nothing more than a personal preference. But after asking a few questions, I discovered she believed the order of the form fields controlled the order of columns in an exported spreadsheet. In reality, the export could be customized independently. Had I simply made the change she requested, it would have created a worse experience for the user while solving the wrong problem entirely.



My client asked me to change the order of some input fields because she didn't realize that the exported file could be independently ordered from the user's input.

DUPLICATE DATA

On another project, a client insisted users needed to re-edit information they had just entered moments earlier on a previous screen. Her explanation seemed confusing until I realized she was mentally comparing the experience to a paper government form she was familiar with. The real issue wasn't editing the data—it was maintaining a sense of continuity and control. Once we understood that, we were able to redesign the flow in a way that addressed her concern without introducing unnecessary complexity.



In the original design, the user moved from one step to the other; my client expressed frustration at not being able to edit the information from Step 1.

The challenge is that stakeholders often recognize that something feels wrong long before they can clearly articulate why. Our responsibility is to look beyond the suggested solution and uncover the real problem underneath it.

Connecting the Dots

Once we understand the real problem, our job becomes shaping it into something more useful than the way it was originally delivered. This is where we add value.

Stakeholder feedback is input. It's data we gather in order to make better decisions. But those inputs rarely arrive in a complete or organized form. One stakeholder is focused on business goals. Another is reacting emotionally to the interface. Someone else is worried about technical limitations. Our responsibility is to process all of those perspectives, identify patterns, weigh tradeoffs, and connect them into a coherent direction. This is the difference between simply collecting feedback and actually processing it.

Consider these simplified examples:

> **Stakeholder**: We need a dashboard.
>
> **Designer**: Do you think our customers need better visibility into the data, or is the issue that people aren't confident making decisions with the current information?
>
> **Stakeholder**: Users need to edit this information on every screen.
>
> **Designer**: It sounds like the bigger concern may be helping users feel in control of the workflow without losing context.
>
> **Stakeholder**: This page feels cluttered.
>
> **Designer**: Is it unclear where users should focus their attention, or is there specific information that feels unnecessary?

Notice that the designer isn't simply repeating the feedback in better language. They're connecting it to a larger problem—decision confidence, continuity, attention—and giving the conversation somewhere more useful to go.

The value we provide as articulate designers is not simply in creating interfaces. It's in helping people make better decisions by turning messy feedback into coherent direction. That's how we process feedback and add value to the conversation.

Once we've done the work to turn a messy conversation into a clear direction, we shouldn't have to reconstruct that thinking again later. But good conversations shouldn't disappear when the meeting ends. The reasoning behind our decisions deserves to be captured, shared, and referenced long after the discussion is over. In the next chapter, we'll look at how documenting our design decisions helps preserve context, improve collaboration, and make future conversations even more productive.

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1 Perhaps you find this anecdote interesting yourself.

[11]

Documenting Design Decisions

If you've ever worked on a long-running project, you've probably had the same conversation more than once. A stakeholder questions a decision that was discussed months earlier. A developer changes an interaction because they don't understand the original intent. A new leader joins the project and asks, "Why did we do it this way?" Teams revisit old problems not because they failed to solve them the first time, but because the reasoning behind those decisions was never preserved in a way people could easily find and understand later.

That's the real purpose of documenting design decisions. An articulate designer doesn't just explain the reasoning behind the work in the moment; they preserve it so other people can understand it later. It's not about paperwork or archiving meeting notes, but preserving the thinking behind our work.

In Chapter 3, we looked at principles, guidelines, and standards as tools for making better, more consistent design decisions. Documentation is what allows the reasoning behind those decisions to survive, accumulate, and eventually become useful beyond the work in front of us.

In this chapter, we'll look at how to document design decisions in a way that preserves context, strengthens your decision-making framework, and helps your team make better decisions long after the meeting is over.

Capturing Information Versus Documenting Decisions

There is an important distinction between capturing information and documenting decisions. They are related, but they are not the same thing. Capturing information happens during the meeting. We take notes, record feedback, identify concerns, and write down unresolved questions. This process is exploratory and often messy because it reflects the conversation as it unfolds.

Documenting decisions happens afterward. It's the deliberate process of synthesizing that discussion into something more durable and useful, often upon reflection. What decision was made? Why was it made? What tradeoffs were considered? What concerns remain unresolved? Good documentation doesn't preserve the conversation—it preserves the conclusion.

This distinction matters because many teams assume that meeting notes, transcripts, or recordings are enough. They aren't. Raw information only becomes valuable when someone transforms it into something future teams can quickly understand and apply.

In many ways, documenting design decisions is an extension of the work we discussed in the previous chapter. Just as we process fragmented stakeholder feedback into a coherent design direction, we also process fragmented conversations into a coherent explanation of the decision. Documentation is simply another form of synthesis.

AI Notetakers and the Reality of Meetings

AI has dramatically changed how we capture meetings. Not long ago, someone in every meeting was responsible for taking notes. Today, AI can transcribe, summarize, and organize conversations automatically. It's become normal for meetings to generate searchable transcripts and summaries within minutes. Honestly, it's difficult to imagine going back to taking notes manually.

But while AI has made capturing information easier, it has not eliminated the need for intentional documentation. A transcript is not the same thing as a decision log. *AI captures conversations. Designers document decisions.* AI can tell you what was said, but it often struggles to identify

why something mattered, which concerns carried the most weight, or what tradeoff ultimately drove the final decision. That interpretation still requires human judgment.

I've found it useful to actively collaborate with AI during meetings rather than letting it passively record in the background. I'll often say things like, *"Hey AI, make a note that we want to revisit this later*," or *"Please flag that as a final decision."* Using language like this creates cleaner summaries because the AI can more easily recognize what the team considered important.

Those transcripts become even more valuable when they're easily searchable with AI tools. Instead of digging through folders or meeting notes, teams can simply ask questions like:

- "What concerns did the executive team raise about this feature?"
- "Which meetings mentioned accessibility concerns?"
- "What tradeoffs led us to this decision?"

Increasingly, AI is making documentation less about navigating folder structures and more about asking good questions. The information still has to exist, but finding it is much more conversational.

Even so, there's value in taking your own notes. Writing forces you to process the conversation: to decide what matters, organize your thinking, and notice patterns you might otherwise miss. AI can capture everything that was said, but understanding it is still our job.

Including the Why

A good example of this is the difference between documenting *what* was decided and *why* it was decided. Most teams (and AI tools) are reasonably good at including what changed. Fewer capture the reasoning behind it. But that rationale is often the most valuable part.

People rarely ask, *"What did we design?"* The interface usually answers that question. Instead, they ask, *"Why did we design it this way?"* If your documentation can't answer that, you need to change your approach.

The "why" doesn't need to be long or formal. In fact, shorter is often better. A single sentence could be enough:

- “Animation removed because it distracted users during testing.”
- “Color updated to align with new accessibility standards.”
- “Multiselect chosen based on customer feedback from onboarding interviews.”
- “Feature deprioritized after executive review.”

Small bits of rationale like this become incredibly valuable over time. They preserve the thinking behind the work and help future teams understand the tradeoffs that shaped the product. You don’t need to document everything. Focus on making sure no one has to rediscover the reasoning behind your most important decisions.

So what does deserve to be documented? Focus on decisions that would be costly to rediscover later: significant tradeoffs, recurring questions, changes to established patterns, or anything someone is likely to ask “Why?” about six months from now. Common choices or temporary details usually don’t need the same treatment.

REVISITING HISTORY

This is especially important because teams change. I experienced this firsthand while working on a product team at one of the largest companies in the United States. During my 18 months on the project, the organization went through three major re-orgs. Leadership changed three different times, and with each transition came many of the same questions: “Why didn’t we do it this way?” “Why was this designed like this?” “Who decided this?”

Fortunately, I had kept notes of our decisions along with brief explanations. In one case, I was able to go back several months and find the exact meeting where a controversial decision had been discussed. I could explain who made the recommendation, why we made the tradeoff, and what constraints existed at the time. We didn’t have to reconstruct the reasoning from memory or have the same conversation all over again.

Creating a Decision Log

Over time, individual decisions begin to form something larger: institutional knowledge. That’s why I recommend maintaining some kind

of centralized decision log or searchable history for important design decisions.
The exact tool matters far less than having a place where people know to look. Whether it's a wiki, shared document, project tracker, or AI-powered knowledge base, the goal is the same: make important decisions easy to find long after the meeting is over. If a decision can't be found later, it may as well have never been documented.
On many of my teams, we've maintained simple shared pages where designers regularly documented:

- Current projects
- Recent decisions
- Research findings
- Follow-up items

Nothing fancy, but over time those pages became incredibly valuable. Stakeholders could see what was happening without another meeting. New team members onboarded faster. Designers referenced previous decisions instead of relying on memory.
One benefit that's easy to overlook is how decision logs influence the conversations themselves. When people know a decision and its rationale will be documented, discussions tend to become more thoughtful. Teams naturally become better at articulating *why* they made a decision because they know someone else may need to understand it months later.



I have used many different tools to document design decisions, but all of them look more or less like this.

One of the challenges with documentation is that there is no single "correct" system for every team. The right approach depends on your team size, organizational culture, tools, workflows, and how formal your process

needs to be. A solo designer probably doesn't need the same level of rigor as a large enterprise organization supporting dozens of products. A startup moving quickly may value speed over structure, while a heavily regulated industry may require much more formal documentation and traceability.
If you're trying to decide where to start, I find it helpful to ask a few practical questions:

- Where does our team already spend time?
- What tools are easiest for people to update?
- How will people retrieve this information later?
- What kinds of decisions are worth preserving?
- Who needs access to this information?
- How formal does this process actually need to be?

The answers will naturally point you toward an approach that fits your team. For some organizations, that might mean documenting decisions directly in design files or tickets. Others may prefer a shared document, an internal wiki, or a project database. Some teams are even beginning to rely on AI connected to meeting transcripts and shared knowledge bases.
The best place for documentation is usually wherever your team already works. If people have to change tools or habits just to record a decision, the system is less likely to succeed.

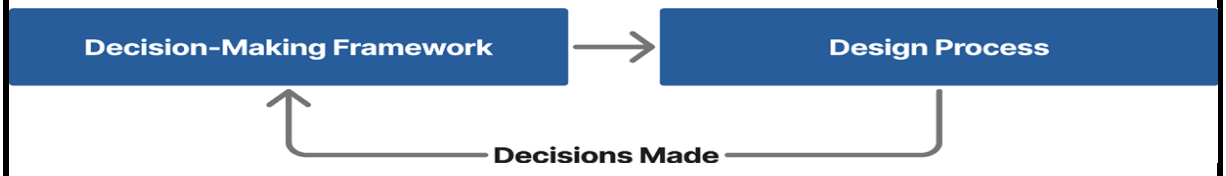


The best system is the one people will use! A simple table linking to a single detail page might be enough.

Documentation as a Feedback Loop

Good documentation doesn't just preserve history; it improves future decisions too. The principles, guidelines, and standards in our decision-making framework aren't static. They evolve as we make new decisions,

recognize recurring patterns, and learn what works. Documentation is what feeds those lessons back into the framework.



Our documented design decisions should help improve our principles, guidelines, and standards so we make better decisions going forward.

The best design systems don't just document the components themselves. They document the reasoning too. Why does this component behave this way? What usability problem does this pattern solve? What research influenced this standard?

This is one of the ways design organizations can mature. Instead of relying on tribal knowledge or the memory of individual designers, the thinking behind the work becomes embedded in the system itself. Mature design teams don't just have better design systems, they have better institutional memory. Decisions happen faster because teams spend less time relearning solutions they've already found.

That doesn't mean every decision belongs in your design principles or standards. Some decisions are temporary. Others are highly contextual. But when the same reasoning appears across projects, that's usually a signal that it should become part of the organization's broader design language. That's how individual decisions become shared knowledge and eventually help shape the decisions that come next.

Practical Principles for Useful Documentation

More documentation isn't inherently better. Useful documentation should reduce friction, repeated conversations, and uncertainty so teams can move faster with shared context.

No matter what system you choose, I've found that the best documentation has a few things in common:

Accessible

People should be able to easily find the information when they need it.

Searchable

Teams should be able to quickly locate past decisions, rationale, and context.

Connected to the work

Documentation is most useful when it lives near the designs, tickets, research, or systems it relates to.

Clear rationale

Explain not just what was decided, but why.

Actionable

Documentation should help teams make future decisions, not simply archive old conversations.

Lightweight

Keep the process simple enough that people will actually maintain it.

In my own work, I still tend to use very simple systems: shared documents, decision logs, weekly updates, and notes attached directly to design files. The exact process matters less than whether it fits naturally into the way your team already works.

It's also important to document decisions as close to the conversation as possible. Context fades quickly. Rationales become fuzzy. Tradeoffs get forgotten. Even a short summary written immediately afterward is usually far more valuable than trying to reconstruct the discussion weeks later.

Finally, write documentation for the future, not just the people currently involved in the project. Future teammates won't remember the questions in the room, the business pressure, or the technical limitations that shaped the decision. I like to imagine myself six months in the future and ask, *"Would future Tom understand why we made this decision?"* If the answer is yes, I've done my job.

The Ad Hoc Design Jam

On one of my teams, it was common for a certain executive to pop in and spin up an impromptu design jam session. These conversations generated lots of ideas but very little documentation. To solve this, my team created a simple template that we all bookmarked. Whenever one of these sessions started, we'd open the template; capture decisions, follow-up items, concerns, and rationale as we talked; and then afterward synthesize those

notes into our decision log. It wasn't complicated, but it ensured that even our most informal conversations became part of the organization's shared knowledge.



Ad Hoc Design Jam Template

Date:
People:

Goal for the Meeting
Support, Approval, Alignment, or Decisions

Goal for the Project
Business goal or metric

Notes / Feedback:

1. Item:
   -

Outstanding Questions:
-

Next Steps:
- Who / What / When

Even with decision logs and AI summaries, sometimes it's easier to grab a simple template and just start typing! You can download this template on my website at *http://tomgreever.com/resources*.

Ultimately, documenting design decisions extends our communication beyond the meeting itself. A good decision log doesn't just record what happened. It preserves the thinking behind the work so future teammates can understand it, build on it, and make better decisions of their own.

Of course, before we can preserve a good decision, we still have to reach one. Questions, concerns, and competing ideas will continue to surface throughout the process, and how we respond to them can determine whether the conversation moves forward or becomes defensive. In the next chapter, we'll look at one of the simplest and most effective ways to keep those conversations productive: leading with a yes.

[Part IV]

Being Articulate Builds Trust

[12]

Leading with a Yes

You've poured your time and energy into these designs. You've thought through the problem, considered your stakeholders, and listened carefully to their feedback. It would be easy, maybe even natural, to jump straight into defending your work. But before you decide what to say, you need to decide how you're going to approach the conversation.

In this chapter, we'll look at a simple technique I call "leading with a yes"—a way to acknowledge what you've heard, find common ground, and keep the conversation moving without giving up your own point of view.

Checking Your Ego

The truth is, you don't control the outcome of a meeting. No matter how great your ideas are, someone else can probably overrule them. There may even be a room full of people who disagree with you. You can't force them to agree. You can only try to influence them.

That realization is important because it shifts your role from defender to facilitator. As we saw in Chapter 9, your job is not to defend your work. Your job is to lead a conversation.

To do that well, you have to let go of your attachment to being right. When we get too tied to our own ideas, it becomes harder to hear others clearly. We start to dismiss suggestions, make assumptions about what others don't

understand, or mentally write off their perspective. That's usually a sign that our ego is getting in the way.

This doesn't mean your expertise isn't valuable—*it is*. You were brought into this work for a reason. But you're not the only one with good ideas, and the best outcomes usually come from combining perspectives, not protecting them.

Leading with a Yes

One of the most effective ways I've found to accomplish this is something that I call "leading with a yes." You may be familiar with the concept of the "yes, and…" that has become common in business environments. The main idea is that your response should always start with the word "yes."

This approach has roots in improvisational comedy. One popular improv exercise requires each actor to agree with the other by saying "yes" first, no matter how wild and crazy their idea is. Why? Because if one actor says no or refuses to go along, it will completely shut down the sketch; they'll have nowhere to go. *It won't tell a good story.*

Guess what? Our meetings with stakeholders *are also* improvisations, aren't they? And if we expect to be able to take these conversations in a positive direction—*to tell a good story*—then just like two actors on a stage, we need to also be willing to lead with a yes.

There is some simple psychology at play here. Leading with a yes makes people feel heard. When people feel heard, they're more open to hearing you. If they feel dismissed or misunderstood, they'll double down on their position—not because they're difficult but because they think you're not listening.

What Leading with a Yes Actually Means

Leading with a yes means that you begin your response by acknowledging and affirming something about the other person's idea or perspective by literally starting with the word "yes."

"Yes, I'm glad you brought that up."

This doesn't mean agreeing with their solution. It means finding something you *can* agree with, whether that's:

- The problem they're pointing out

- The goal they're trying to achieve
- The intent behind their suggestion
- Their expertise, enthusiasm, or contribution

Leading with a yes is about reminding people of the areas where we do agree, before we get to the parts where we don't. It's about demonstrating that we're all on the same team, headed in the same direction, even if we have different ideas about how to get there. The goal is to create alignment first and then work through the details together.

The concept of leading with a yes was modeled for me by one of my mentors and former leaders, Dave Ferguson. Early in his leadership, he encountered people proposing ambitious ideas that seemed impossible. Rather than turn them away, he chose to say yes, discovering that people were more motivated, empowered, and passionate when their ideas were given permission to succeed. Even if they didn't fully accomplish their goal, it was far better to empower people to do great things than to shut them down. Dave says, "We have learned that if we want to be involved in innovative and creative new things, we have to 'lead with a yes.'"[1] This foundational principle is further supported by an article he references from *Fast Company* magazine titled "My Greatest Lesson" by Katherine Hudson. In that article, she says, "When someone offers you a challenge, don't think of all the reasons why you can't do it. Instead, say, 'Yes!' Then figure out how you'll get it done."

Principles for Leading with a Yes

So how do you actually do this? Leading with a yes isn't just about saying the word; it's about how you approach the conversation. At its core, it follows a few simple principles:

- Find something you can say yes to.
- Acknowledge before you redirect.
- Don't agree to something you can't support.
- Avoid "yes, but…"—it cancels out the yes.

Let's look at each one.

FINDING SOMETHING YOU CAN SAY YES TO

We can always find *something* to say yes to, even if it's just the fact that our stakeholder has shared new information with us. You could agree on the problem, but not necessarily the solution. You could agree that they're making a good point, that their expertise is valuable, or that you appreciate their contribution. Whatever they throw at you, quickly find something that you can say yes to without committing to one specific path yet.

ACKNOWLEDGING BEFORE YOU REDIRECT

It's important to start with the yes as an acknowledgment and then redirect to what you think the right choice is, rather than the other way around. If you start with "Well, the reason we did it that way is…" it will immediately feel like excuses or possibly even dismissive. That's why the first word is always "yes" followed by an acknowledgment of their suggestion.

DON'T AGREE TO SOMETHING YOU CAN'T SUPPORT

While the goal is to find something to say yes to, you still need to be clear about what you believe is the right path forward. Starting with validation is helpful, but it can sometimes lead to accidentally committing to something you don't actually intend to support.

For example, I often hear designers say, "Yes, that's a good point. I'll try that and we can see…" when, in reality, they don't think it's a good use of time. They're trying to stay positive but end up backing themselves into a commitment they didn't intend to make.

That's the risk. Leading with a yes doesn't mean agreeing to take action; it means acknowledging the idea. You still need to use your judgment about what's worth pursuing. In general, avoid making commitments unless you genuinely believe it's the right thing to do.

AVOID "YES, BUT…"

"*Yes, but…*" is just another way of saying no, and that's how it will land for most people. The same goes for "Yes, however…." In many cases, I've found you can simply remove those words and the sentence still works. Instead of saying, "Yes, but if we do it that way," you can say, "Yes, if we do it that way…." The meaning is the same, but the tone is very different.

Sometimes I'll even pause where the "but" would normally go, almost like I'm saying it in my head, but choosing not to say it out loud. Another common approach is to replace "but" with "and." "*Yes, and if we do it that way…*" keeps the conversation additive and collaborative, rather than corrective. It's a small change, but it makes a big difference in how your response is received.

"Yes" Moves the Conversation Forward

Leading with a "yes" provides a framework to move the conversation forward while remaining genuine and clear about your recommended solution.

Use these strategies to leverage "yes" in different scenarios:

Validate their perspective

This is the most common approach. It shows you understand them before sharing your view.

"*Yes, I appreciate you sharing that perspective…*"

Align on the problem or goal

We can agree on the problem or goal, without committing to a solution. This shifts the focus to shared objectives.

"*Yes, I agree this is something we need to improve…*"

Highlight tradeoffs or constraints

Help them understand the implications of their suggestion without shutting the idea down.

"*Yes, that would improve the experience. Here's what we'd need to make it happen…*"

Turn it into a shared decision

Allow them to participate in seeing how their recommendation impacts other priorities.

"*Yes, we can do that if we prioritize it over X. Is that the right call?*"

Redirect or buy time

Sometimes we don't know the impact of their idea and need time to come up with a recommendation.

"*Yes, that's a helpful suggestion. I'd like to explore that further…*"

Demonstrate your expertise

Reinforce your thinking without being defensive and show you're being intentional.

"*Yes, we looked at that approach and here's what we found…*"

A SIMPLE BUT POWERFUL EFFECT

Sometimes, leading with a yes alone can help you move forward without even having to discuss it further. I was in a meeting with several people, including the president of the company, when he began nitpicking one specific part of the design. It was an important part of the experience, but his feedback focused on very detailed suggestions—placement, copy, color, and interaction. It felt a bit misplaced. Why would an executive care about these details? Rather than push back, I said, "Yes, I agree we should reconsider this." He immediately stopped and said, "Great, I know you guys will find the right solution."

He didn't actually want to get into the minutia. In hindsight, he was probably just thinking out loud—he noticed something and shared it. He knew it wasn't his job to solve it. My response reassured him that we were listening and taking it seriously. That was all he needed. Once he felt heard, he was happy to let us do our jobs, and we moved on.

Putting It into Practice

Leading with a yes is one of the easiest things you can apply right away. It's simple, low risk, and you can try it in your very next meeting:

- Yes, that's a very good point.
- Yes, thank you for sharing your perspective.
- Yes, I agree that we need to solve this.
- Yes, there are definitely some ways we can improve this.
- Yes, we should decide the best path forward.
- Yes, I understand where you're coming from.

At first, this can feel a little awkward. It's not always natural to start a sentence with "yes," especially if you're being asked a direct question. But that awkwardness is mostly felt on your side. With practice, it becomes second nature.

People often ask if they have to use the word "yes" or if something like "yeah" or "OK" works just as well. While there are other ways to communicate the same intent, I've found that "yes" is the most clear and effective. It signals validation immediately and sets the tone for what follows.

TRY THIS EXERCISE

Here's a simple exercise that demonstrates how powerful this approach can be while giving you a low-risk way to practice. You'll need another person. Ask them to propose an idea, anything will do, but let's say they're planning a party. The wilder and more over the top, the better.

Your job is to challenge their idea. Poke holes in it, explain why it won't work, and try to convince them it's a bad idea. But you're going to do it twice.

The first time you have to start every response with "no." No matter what they suggest, say "no" first and then explain why. Go back and forth for a few rounds and notice how the conversation feels.

Then do it again, but this time start every response with "yes." Your objective hasn't changed—you are still trying to shut down the idea—but now the first word out of your mouth has to be "yes." Try it for a few more rounds and compare the two conversations.

What did you notice? The difference is usually immediate. Starting with no makes the conversation defensive. People dig in, repeat themselves, and try harder to justify their position. The conversation has nowhere to go.

Starting with yes changes the tone. You tend to ask more questions, explore possibilities, and work together toward a shared understanding, even though you still disagree.

I like this exercise because it demonstrates the principle but also because it shows that leading with a yes takes practice. Finding a genuine "yes" when your instinct is to disagree isn't always easy.

PRACTICING WITH AI

Another way to build this habit is to practice with an AI assistant. Ask it to role-play a stakeholder, respond naturally, and then critique how well you acknowledged the idea before redirecting the conversation. Try prompting it with a scenario like:

"Role-play an executive stakeholder reviewing a checkout flow. Challenge my design decisions naturally. After the meeting, critique how well I led with a yes, kept the conversation collaborative, and articulated my design decisions."

You'll start to see patterns in how to acknowledge the idea, align on the problem, and redirect the conversation. It's a low-pressure way to practice finding the "yes" before you're in a real conversation.

Common Concerns

I know there are always a few skeptics out there who aren't quite sure about this approach. Perhaps that's you. If so, your caution is well placed. I, too, wasn't sure that this was a valid method until I had tried it myself, so allow me to dispel some of the most common concerns and misunderstandings.

WHAT IF I DISAGREE WITH WHAT THEY'RE SAYING?

You can still lead with a yes, even when you disagree. Because the goal isn't to agree with their solution. It's to validate their thinking by finding something you *can* agree with.

For example, you might understand the problem they're trying to solve, but disagree with how they want to solve it. In that case, you could say:

"Yes, I agree we need to reconsider the placement of this element."

You're not agreeing with their solution; you're aligning on the problem. And that leaves room to explore other approaches that might solve it more effectively.

IS THIS JUST SAYING YES, WHEN I ACTUALLY MEAN NO?

No. In fact, if you're using it as a way to say no, then you're doing it wrong. This also isn't the "compliment sandwich," where you wrap criticism between two nice things to make it easier to hear. It's not a psychological trick to get people to agree with you or to disguise your disagreement; it's to find genuine alignment. You're still responsible for being clear about what you think the right choice is. Leading with a yes

simply helps you do that in a way that keeps the conversation collaborative, not confrontational.

ISN'T THIS MANIPULATIVE? OR DISINGENUOUS?

It shouldn't be. The goal is to find something you can genuinely say yes to, whether that's the problem they're raising or simply that you value their perspective. As long as that part is honest, it's neither manipulative nor disingenuous. You're not pretending to agree. You're acknowledging something real, even if you ultimately have a different recommendation. In that sense, leading with a yes is actually the opposite of manipulation. It's a way of being transparent about what you appreciate in their input, while still being clear about the direction you think is best. You're saying, "I hear you, and this matters."

ARE THERE TIMES WHEN I SHOULD JUST SAY NO?

Yes, sometimes a direct "no" may be the clearest way forward, but it's not the only way, and it's not without risk. I've worked in environments with values like "disagree and commit" or "radical candor." In practice, though, those ideas can sometimes be used as an excuse to be needlessly confrontational without showing consideration for the other person. And while directness has its place, it can also create defensiveness and shut down the conversation, even if you're right.

Leading with a yes, on the other hand, works across a wider range of situations. It allows you to be both positive and clear at the same time. You can often accomplish the same outcome without creating unnecessary friction. You're not avoiding disagreement. You're handling it in a way that keeps the conversation productive and the relationship intact.

WHAT IF THEY KNOW WHAT I'M DOING?

It's true that a lot of people are already familiar with this approach, so there's a chance they will recognize it. That's OK because it's not a mind trick and it is still effective, even if they know what we're doing.

I've been on the receiving end of this myself. Once, my own boss used it on me. I shared an idea, he paused, took a breath, and then almost comically exclaimed, "Yes!" before pausing again to continue with, "...*and*, did you consider…?" Both of us had a laugh about it, but you know what? It still worked because he made it clear that he valued my

input. Even when we disagreed, I felt heard, and that made me more open to his perspective—even if it was overdone.

That's the point. This isn't a trick. It's a signal. It shows that you're listening, that you respect the other person, and that you're willing to work through the problem together.

Changing Your Own Mindset

You may have noticed that I placed this chapter before we actually get into how we respond to design feedback. That's because leading with a yes isn't just about helping our stakeholders feel good about the process. It also changes how we show up by helping us get in the right mindset. Leading with a yes actually has as many benefits for us, too.

ENABLES YOU TO BE A BETTER FACILITATOR

As we have already discussed, your role is to be a facilitator. This approach allows you to take on that role appropriately. It helps you stay calm, focused, and confident. Instead of reacting defensively, you're starting from a place of alignment. That makes it easier to think clearly and communicate effectively.

MAKES YOU MORE OPEN BY REDUCING YOUR BIAS

If you immediately reject their idea, you'll stop exploring it. You're no longer trying to understand it; you're trying to explain why your idea is better. But when you start with yes, you give yourself a moment to fully consider it while working through it in the context of the conversation. That results in you remaining open to the possibilities, and not throwing out valuable information that you need to make an informed decision.

HELPS YOU COMMUNICATE CONFIDENCE

And last, leading with a yes can actually make you more confident. When you begin from a place of agreement, you remove the tension that often makes these conversations feel confrontational. You're no longer trying to "win" the interaction. That shift alone can make you sound more composed, more thoughtful, and more in control of the conversation.

I was leading a workshop on this when a participant shared his experience with it. He had been in a meeting when a stakeholder suggested something he initially thought was a bad idea. Having just read the book, he decided to lead with a yes but with the intention of turning it into a no. (Which, as you know, is already the wrong way to approach it.)

As he started talking through the stakeholder's idea, though, something shifted. In explaining it, he realized their idea was actually better than what he had proposed. He admitted he never would have seen that if he had just shut it down. Leading with a yes didn't just change the conversation; it changed his thinking. It gave him the space to fully consider the idea and ultimately led to a better decision for everyone.
This doesn't mean every idea is good, but it does mean you're giving yourself a fair chance to evaluate it. Leading with a yes keeps you open enough to see what you might otherwise miss.

Leading with a yes is ultimately a mindset. It reminds you that you're on the same team, keeps you open to ideas you might otherwise dismiss, and creates space to think before you respond. You can still disagree. You can still recommend a different direction. But starting from genuine alignment makes it much easier to keep the conversation constructive and influence where it goes.

Now we're ready to respond. In the next chapter, we'll look at how to structure that response so your reasoning is clear, compelling, and actionable.

1 Dave Ferguson, Jon Ferguson, and Eric Bramlett, The Big Idea (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), p. 180. Used with permission.

A Strategy for Responding

Now that it's time to respond to our stakeholders, we need to take everything we've gathered so far and apply it in the moment. Responding to feedback is about moving the conversation toward the goal of the meeting: getting support and agreement to move forward.

To do this, we can break the response into a few core parts that work together to make our case clear and effective. This approach isn't unique to design. Any discipline that aims to influence action—marketing, advertising, politics—follows a similar pattern.



At a high level, crafting a strong response means:

Establishing an objective

What do we want from our stakeholders?

Defining your strategy

What will you say to make a compelling case?

Applying tactics

How will you deliver that message?

Identifying common messages
: What responses will be effective?

Asking for agreement
: What do you want stakeholders to do next?

Each piece builds on the others. Our objective is already defined: to get support from our stakeholders and agreement to move forward. In this chapter, we'll focus on choosing a strategy and then applying one or more tactics to put that strategy into action.
If this sounds a bit structured, that's intentional. Breaking a response into individual pieces helps us understand what's happening so that, in practice, it can all come together naturally. That's ultimately what we want as articulate designers: not to sound like we're following a formula but to have these ideas internalized well enough that a thoughtful response comes naturally.

Choosing a Strategy

Everything should work toward our objective (stakeholder support and agreement to move forward), so we need a strategy that keeps our response focused and intentional.
Let's go back to the three questions from Chapter 2:

- What problem does it solve?
- How does it affect the user?
- Why is it better than the alternative?

These three questions form the foundation of every response you give. If you can clearly communicate them, you're setting yourself up for success. Just as important, they give you a simple structure to rely on in the moment. Your answers become your strategy. They shape what you say and guide how you say it. From there, we can use the tactics to deliver that message effectively. Let's look at how each of these questions translates into a clear strategy for responding.

STRATEGY 1: APPEAL TO A NOBLER MOTIVE

Every time you respond to design feedback, connect your decisions to a goal, metric, or problem you're trying to solve. This is where your answer to "*What problem does this solve?"* comes in.

Appealing to a nobler motive is one of the steps of communication in Dale Carnegie's book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, and it's especially effective in design discussions. You want to anchor your decisions in what your stakeholders care most about and clearly connect them to the user experience.

Every product has goals—metrics, objectives, or other success criteria—and our designs should support them. Ideally, these are defined up front. If they're not, take the time to define them and align with your stakeholders. Without that shared understanding, it becomes much harder to make a compelling case.

The challenge is that stakeholder feedback doesn't always come from that perspective. People react to what they see without thinking about the goals. That's natural—design is meant to create a response. But those reactions don't always reflect the original intent of the project.

Your job is to bring the conversation back to that intent. Keep the goals visible and use them as the foundation for your decisions and center of the conversation.

Increasing add-to-cart rate

I was working on an ecommerce site with a specific goal: increase the add-to-cart rate. We designed interactions tailored to that objective and to the unique logistics of the business. As stakeholders reviewed the work, questions started to surface. "Why is this button so big?" "Do we really need this interaction?" Others shifted to different metrics entirely: "What about cart abandonment? Conversion?"

In those moments, I brought the conversation back to our goal for that phase, increasing add-to-cart, and explained how these decisions supported it. Without that shared focus, the discussion could have easily spiraled into trying to address every concern at once, resulting in a muddled experience. Instead, we stayed disciplined and aligned the design to the problem we were asked to solve.

Appealing to a nobler motive doesn't just help justify your decisions: it also helps you keep the meeting on track. In another meeting with the same

team, a discussion about the store finder started pulling us away from the work at hand, so I put it in the backlog and brought everyone back to the goal for that phase.
This happens often. Teams get pulled into details that don't actually move the goal forward. If your objective is to improve conversion but the conversation turns into a debate about loading indicators, you're drifting. Those details might matter, but not right now.
When that happens, it can be helpful to gently redirect the conversation with phrases like:

- "That's a good point. Let's look at how it fits with what we're trying to accomplish in this phase."
- "Let's use our goals as a way to evaluate these options."
- "If we come back to our original objective, does that change how we think about this?"

Your job is to recognize that and guide the team back. When you consistently connect decisions to goals, use cases, or metrics, you not only make a stronger case, you keep the conversation productive.

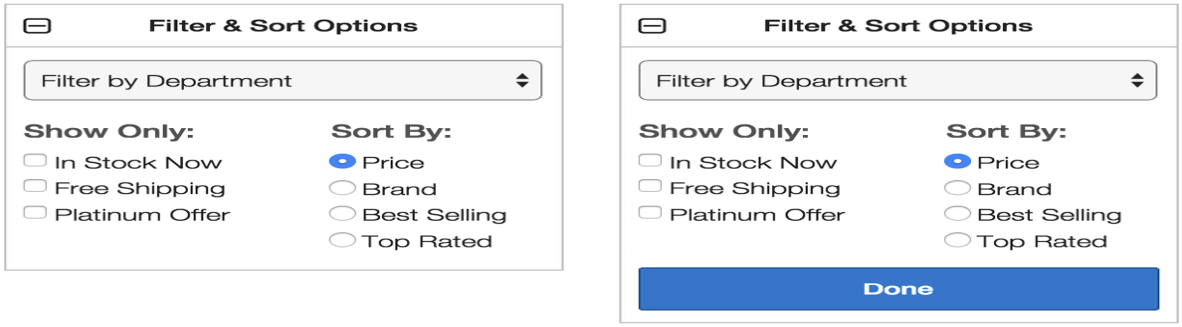
STRATEGY 2: REPRESENT THE USER

It may seem obvious, but it's often overlooked. Our response should bring the user into the conversation in a way that is tangible and real, not just mentioned in passing. We need to answer the question: "*How does this affect the user?"*
We talk about "the user" all the time, but our role isn't just to consider them. It's to advocate for them. In these conversations, we are their representatives.
That means going beyond system behavior and explaining decisions in human terms. Your response is an opportunity to take what you know about your users and turn it into something your stakeholders can connect with: something that creates empathy and drives better decisions.

Adding a button

Modern web applications often update content instantly without refreshing. While that's efficient, it can confuse users who expect visible feedback. In one app, users could apply filters that updated results immediately, but

some didn't realize anything had changed and assumed the app wasn't responding.
To address this, I added a simple Done button that closed the filter panel and gave users a sense of completion. The button didn't actually change the results; it just made the interaction feel clear and intentional.



The addition of a Done button gave the user a greater sense of control, but in fact did nothing more than close the panel.

When I presented this to stakeholders, I had to justify adding something that seemed unnecessary and took up space.
The easiest approach would be to use general terms:

> In our research, users didn't realize results were updating automatically, so we added a Done button to give them a sense of completion.

The best approach, though, is to tell a story:

> We saw a parent using the app in the store with their kids. They didn't notice the results updating and tapped repeatedly. The Done button makes that interaction clearer and helps them find products faster.

The difference is subtle, but powerful. When you tell a story about a real person, it's much easier for stakeholders to understand ***and care about*** the decision.
User research and observation are critical here. You can't represent users you've never seen. Even a small number of observations can give you insights that make your communication more compelling. When you bring those insights into the room and speak on behalf of your users, your decisions become easier to understand…and much harder to ignore.

STRATEGY 3: DEMONSTRATE EFFECTIVENESS

This is where we make the case for our solution and earn the support needed to move forward. "*Why is this better than the alternative?*" It's also where designers often struggle. We may be good at solving problems with design, but we don't always communicate *why* our approach is better. Being intentional about demonstrating that value is critical.

Your response shouldn't just explain your thinking; it should show it. Whenever possible, focus on the differences between your solution and the alternatives, and make those differences visible. You'll help your stakeholders see exactly how and why your design works better.

Generative AI can be especially useful here because it makes ideas faster to visualize. Rather than treating generated output as the final design, use it as a communication tool to make alternatives tangible. Sometimes seeing an idea in action is far more effective than trying to explain it.

Showing instead of telling

User flows are a good example of how hard this can be to communicate. What makes sense on a whiteboard can feel very different in practice. Creating a quick prototype can help.

On one mobile project, we had a complex signup flow for promotions, driven by a range of variables: how the user arrived, whether they had an account, their subscription status, and more. The result was a maze of possible paths, and even we found it confusing. After the team aligned on a solution, I suggested simplifying it, but stakeholders weren't convinced it would handle every case.

So instead of debating diagrams, I built a quick prototype to show how it would work. The reaction was immediate. Seeing the flows in action made the complexity obvious and the simpler version clearly better. In this case, no amount of explanation would have been as effective as seeing it. I had to demonstrate it.

That's the goal. When you can show your design in action, you make your case far more compelling and much easier to agree with.

Putting Strategy into Action

Now that we've chosen a strategy, the next step is to put it into action. The three strategies we just discussed describe the overall approach you want to

take. The following tactics are the specific techniques you use to carry out that strategy in the conversation.
When discussing design, I suggest five core tactics:

1. Show a comparison
2. Propose an alternative
3. Give them a choice
4. Ask others to weigh in
5. Postpone the decision

There's no single way to apply these. Depending on the situation, you might use one or several. Your job is to choose the approach that best supports your strategy and helps you make a compelling case.

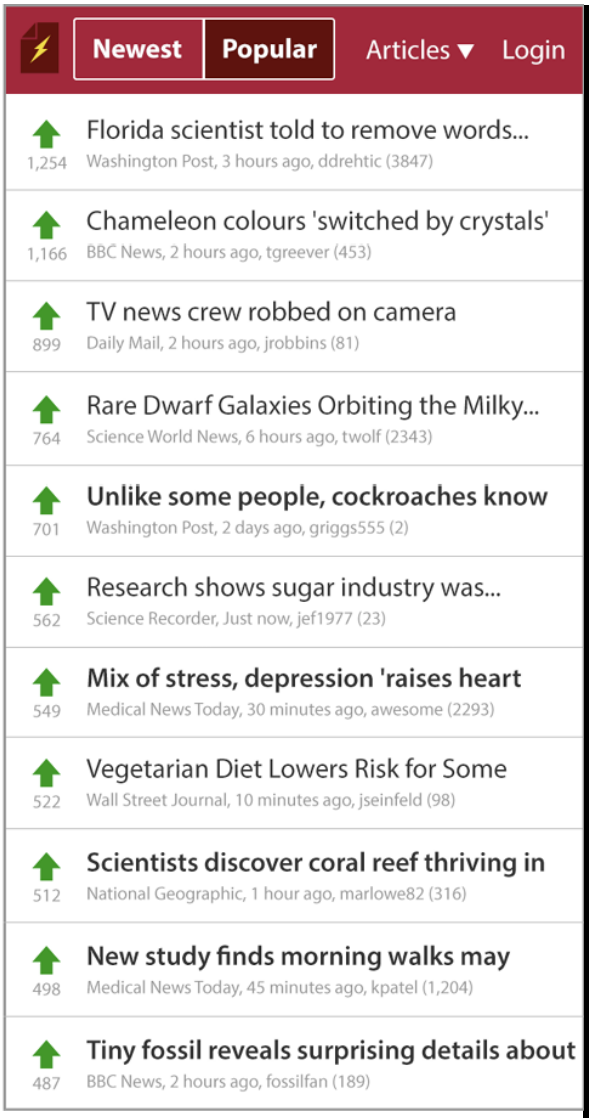
1. SHOW A COMPARISON

Take your proposed design and the suggested change and place them side by side so the differences are clear. The goal is to make the decision obvious.
Too often, we rely on words to describe design decisions, but words can't fully convey how something feels in use. Instead, make quick changes and show both options in the same view. I typically do this in design software, dropping both versions onto the same canvas with a clear dividing line so we can discuss them without switching tabs or relying on memory. Sometimes I'll prepare both versions in advance if I anticipate the feedback so I can walk in ready to show the differences. This is another great use of generative AI: letting it handle the artifacts while you focus on telling the right story.

Side by side

On one project, we had a two-level navigation, with filters taking up a second row. While useful, those filters weren't part of our primary goal. We were trying to maximize the amount of content (news headlines) visible on mobile screens. To achieve that, I redesigned the navigation into a single row and moved the filters into a dropdown, prioritizing the most important items.





I redesigned the navigation to be one level because fitting headlines in the vertical browser space was an important goal for this project.

When I showed this to the client, he pushed back: “How will users know what they can filter if they can’t see the filters?” Rather than debate it, I showed both versions side by side. The difference was immediate. The new design clearly allowed more content to be visible, directly supporting our goal. That’s the power of comparison. It communicates what words often can’t.

When stakeholders suggest changes, it’s rarely enough to just show their idea in isolation. Without context, it can seem like the right choice. But

when you compare it directly to your original design, the tradeoffs become clear, and the better solution has a chance to stand on its own.

2. PROPOSE AN ALTERNATIVE

As we saw in Chapter 9, bringing alternatives helps you prepare for the directions a conversation might take. Now you can put that preparation to work. When a stakeholder suggests a change, you don't have to choose between accepting it or defending your original design. Propose another way to solve the same problem.

Most stakeholders aren't equipped to propose fully formed design solutions, and that's OK. Even strong ideas need refinement. Your role isn't to dismiss their input, but to build on it. Take what they're suggesting seriously, and then apply your expertise to improve it. That's where you add the most value.

When their feedback comes in broad or vague terms, it's a signal that they're pointing at a problem, not prescribing the best solution. For example, "just add a button" is common, but a button is rarely the right answer on its own.

> **Stakeholder**: Just put a big button in the header.
>
> **Designer**: Yes, I can see why you'd want to make that action more prominent. If that's the priority, I'd suggest we look at a few ways to give it more emphasis without competing with the other actions in the header.

Stakeholders may now come to the table with more fully formed ideas, including prototypes generated with AI. Don't resist that; engage with it. Your role is still to evaluate, refine, and guide those ideas toward something that addresses real user needs.

Most stakeholders also expect you to bring your own ideas to the table. That's why you're there. Don't be afraid to interpret their feedback and respond with a better solution. Even if they choose a different direction, you've demonstrated thoughtful reasoning and reinforced your role as a partner.

Over time, consistently proposing strong alternatives builds trust and shows that you're committed to making the product better, not just defending your work.

3. GIVE THEM A CHOICE

Every decision involves tradeoffs, and your job is to make those tradeoffs visible. What changes if we go down this path? What do we give up? What are the risks? Stakeholders don't always see how one decision affects another.

Earlier I compared this to solving a Rubik's Cube: you can't change one side without affecting the others. Giving stakeholders a choice helps make those connections and tradeoffs visible so they can consider the product as a whole.

Here are some examples:

- *"If we add that new call to action, it's going to push the login form further down the page, and we've already said we want that to be more prominent."*
- *"We can add that, but it will delay the dashboard graphs, which we've identified as a priority for this phase."*
- *"If we include that option in the menu, we'll have to remove either Preferences or History. Which would you prefer to drop?"*
- *"Changing this link to a button will compete with the other primary actions on the page. If we go that route, we'll need to rethink those as well."*

In each case, the goal is to highlight the tradeoff. This helps stakeholders see their feedback in the context of the broader priorities and brings them into the decision-making process with the right information.

When people understand what's at stake, they're more likely to arrive at the same conclusion on their own. That's the ideal outcome: not forcing agreement, but creating clarity.

Pay attention to what might be lost, stay aware of how decisions are connected, and call it out when something will negatively impact the overall experience.

4. ASK OTHERS TO WEIGH IN

This is where the support network you built earlier really pays off. When there are often people in the room who agree with you, instead of carrying

the full burden yourself, invite them to share their perspective. This helps create alignment and shows that your thinking isn't isolated; it's shared by others.

It also reduces the need for direct confrontation. Rather than positioning yourself against a stakeholder, you shift the conversation toward shared agreement.

Ask directly

Call on people by name and invite them to respond. Broad questions to the group often fall flat, especially if someone has already spoken strongly.

"David, what are your thoughts on this?"

"David, you had a perspective on this earlier—would you mind sharing?"

Remain neutral

Ask in a way that doesn't reveal bias. Keep the question open-ended and avoid framing it as a disagreement between people.

"I'd be interested in your perspective on this"

instead of

"Do you agree with Susan?"

This sets the tone and avoids pitting people against each other.

Stuck in the middle

On one project, two UX teams were collaborating for the first time, each with strong opinions. I found it difficult to reach consensus on certain user interface (UI) details, especially with one particularly vocal leader in the group. I knew that if I could get his support early, it would make the broader conversation easier. So I shared my designs with him ahead of time, and we aligned on a solution.

In the larger meeting, I called on him directly to share his perspective. Because of his role, he was able to make the case effectively without me having to step into a confrontational position. He did the heavy lifting, the conversation stayed positive, and we arrived at the right outcome.

Asking others to weigh in isn't about avoiding responsibility; it's about using the room effectively. When you bring the right voices into the conversation, you strengthen your case and make it easier for everyone to move forward.

5. POSTPONE THE DECISION

Rather than committing to something that could harm the user experience, give yourself time to step back, think it through, and return with a better solution.

Ideas that sound good in the moment don't always hold up in practice. Taking time to evaluate them more carefully is almost always worth it, and stakeholders will generally appreciate that you want to get it right.

You can do this while still leading with a yes:

"Yes, I see your point, and we want to make sure we get this right. Let me take some time to explore it and come back with a few options."

Postponing doesn't mean slowing down. Use that time to work through the feedback while it's still fresh, explore a few possibilities, and come back with something more thoughtful than whatever the group could design on the spot.

Meeting adjourned

On one project, a single suggestion turned into a brainstorm that drifted further and further from the original problem. As I listened, it became clear we were heading toward a solution that didn't make sense.

So I stepped in and stopped the meeting. Yes, 15 minutes into an hour-long session I sent everyone back to their desks while I stayed behind to crank out several alternatives that would be more useful in leading the discussion, without five people looking over my shoulder and touching my screen.[1] Before the hour was up, I called everyone back and walked through the options. One stood out, we refined it, and it eventually made it to production.

Postponing the decision—even for a short time—gave me the space to reset the conversation and come back with something better. It also saved the team from spending an hour going in circles.

You won't always need to be that drastic. Instead of ending the meeting, you might simply stop brainstorming solutions and use the remaining time

to better understand the problem. What constraint are we trying to address? What's driving the urgency? What do we need the solution to accomplish? That keeps the conversation productive without forcing the group to co-design a solution on the spot. You can take what you've learned, work through the possibilities afterward, and come back with a more thoughtful response.

The point isn't to postpone the conversation. It's to give yourself permission to postpone the decision. Sometimes the most productive thing you can do in the moment is make sure you understand the problem before trying to solve it.

A good response doesn't come from memorizing the perfect thing to say. It comes from knowing what you're trying to accomplish and having a few reliable ways to get there. Your strategy gives you direction, while these tactics give you practical ways to move the conversation forward. With experience, you'll learn which combinations work best in different situations, and they'll begin to feel less like a framework and more like a natural part of the conversation.

Of course, knowing your strategy and tactics still leaves one important question: *what do you actually say?* Fortunately, many design conversations follow familiar patterns. In the next chapter, we'll look at some of the messages I've found myself using again and again to explain design decisions and make a compelling case.

1 Don't touch my screen!

[14]

Choosing a Message



Now that we've established a strategy and some tactics for responding to stakeholders, the next piece is the message itself: *what do we actually say?* Over the years, I've found that certain ways of explaining design decisions come up again and again. The specifics may change, but the underlying messages are consistent, so I've compiled the ones I use most often here for reference.

These aren't scripts and they aren't the only messages that work. Think of them as starting points you can adapt to your situation. Depending on the conversation, you might use one message or combine several to make your case. And it doesn't matter whether the solution came from you, a teammate, a stakeholder, or an AI-generated prototype. You still need to understand and articulate why it works, where it falls short, and how it addresses the problem.

I've organized them into four categories (in no particular order): Business, Design, Research, and Limitations.

Business

One of the most effective ways to make a case for your designs is to connect them directly to the needs of the business. Here are some common ways to do that:

- “Helps achieve a goal”
- “Facilitates a use case”
- “Aligns with the brand”
- “Reduces risk”

“HELPS ACHIEVE A GOAL”

We’ve already seen how useful it is to connect a decision to the goal you’re trying to achieve. One simple way to put that strategy into words is:

> “[design] will affect [goal] because [reason].”

For example:

- “Moving ‘Related Items’ above the product description will increase engagement because users have more opportunities to explore.”
- “Putting ‘Recent Projects’ at the top will improve data quality because users can update information more easily.”
- “Removing the login requirement will reduce abandonment because users can access content without friction.”

This gives stakeholders something more useful to evaluate than whether they personally like the design. You’re connecting the decision to an outcome the business already cares about and making your reasoning clear. As often as you can, connect your design back to what the business is trying to achieve.

“FACILITATES A USE CASE”

This is one of the most common ways to explain a design decision: it supports a specific use case. Everything we design is rooted in a user need, but stakeholders may not see that right away. Calling it out helps make your thinking more visible and easier to follow:

> “We prioritized [design] because the primary use case is [need/task].”

Often, this means prioritizing a primary use case over secondary or edge cases. For example, while users can manage their account settings, it’s not the main purpose of the product, so those actions live in a menu instead of taking up prime space. Framing decisions this way helps keep the focus on what matters most.

It may seem obvious, but teams regularly drift away from the primary use case during discussions. When that happens, bring it back. Remind everyone what the product is meant to do and how your decisions support that goal.

“ALIGNS WITH THE BRAND”

Sometimes the right decision is simply the one that aligns with the brand. If color, type, tone, language, or interaction follows established guidelines or helps communicate the brand, say so. It’s a straightforward and valid reason.

At the same time, product design can influence how a brand shows up in the interface. Many brand systems don’t account for things like buttons, inputs, or interaction patterns. That creates an opportunity to collaborate with marketing and evolve the brand in a way that works for real products.

By pointing out where branding works and where it needs to adapt, you help create a more cohesive experience and a stronger, more practical design system overall.

“REDUCES RISK”

While we often focus on growth—improving conversion, increasing engagement—many stakeholders are just as concerned with avoiding negative outcomes.

Risk can take many forms: losing users, introducing errors, hurting performance, or creating confusion. When you position your decision as a way to minimize those risks, it becomes easier for stakeholders to support it.

For example:

- “This approach reduces the risk of user error because the steps are clearer and more predictable.”

- “Using this pattern reduces the risk of confusion since it’s already familiar to users.”
- “Testing this first helps us reduce the risk of negatively impacting conversion.”

In many cases, stakeholders are more comfortable choosing the option that feels safer, especially when the downside of being wrong is high. Framing your decision this way shows that you’re not just thinking about what could work, but also what might go wrong and how to avoid it.
As with all of these messages, you’re not trying to create fear. You’re demonstrating thoughtful decision making by showing that your design considers both opportunity and risk, which builds confidence in your approach.

Design

Sometimes the best explanation comes from the design itself. When we can explain the thinking behind those choices, we help stakeholders see that they aren’t arbitrary or based solely on personal preference.
There are a few common ways I tend to describe these decisions:

- “Improves consistency”
- “Draws the user’s attention”
- “Creates a flow for the user”
- “Follows an established principle”

“IMPROVES CONSISTENCY”

Most organizations rely on design systems, pattern libraries, or style guides. These give us a set of established ways to solve common problems: patterns that are often already built, tested, and familiar to users. As we’ve seen in the last few chapters, these systems also preserve decisions that have already been made, so we don’t have to reconsider the same questions every time they come up.
Designers also draw from patterns they’ve seen across other products. When used intentionally, these familiar approaches make experiences easier

to learn and reduce confusion. Users don't have to figure things out from scratch; they can rely on what they already know.
Your stakeholders may not think in terms of "patterns," so it helps to frame this as consistency. When we change an expected interaction in one place, it can create confusion or require us to change it everywhere else. These decisions aren't isolated. They affect the entire experience.
Using established patterns improves consistency for users and is often faster and more efficient for the business. It allows us to build on what already works, rather than reinventing it each time.

"DRAWS THE USER'S ATTENTION"

Some design decisions are driven by how people visually scan and interact with a screen. We use things like color, spacing, layout, and type to guide attention and lead users from one step to the next.
These choices can feel subjective, but the goal is simple: move the user from point A to point B. You don't need to explain all the psychology; just make the intent clear.
For example:

- "The headline and call to action are arranged so the user reads first, and then acts."
- "We used contrast here to draw attention to the primary action."
- "The layout follows a left-to-right, top-to-bottom scan pattern."

Help stakeholders see that these decisions aren't just about aesthetics. They're about guiding behavior and helping users take action. You probably don't need to give your stakeholders a lecture on visual hierarchy. They just need to understand what you're trying to get the user to notice and why.

"CREATES A FLOW FOR THE USER"

A lot of work goes into designing user flows: mapping steps, handling edge cases, and removing friction. That structure shows up in the final design, even if it's not always obvious. Small changes can disrupt that flow, sometimes without anyone realizing it. A well-intentioned tweak in one place can create confusion or friction later in the experience. When discussing changes, bring it back to the flow: how users move through the product and what helps them keep going:

> “This flow is designed so each step builds on the last. Changing this step would interrupt that progression.”
>
> “We start with just an email to reduce friction, then collect more information later. Adding fields here would increase drop-off.”

This helps protect the path you’ve designed while showing stakeholders how each decision affects the overall experience.

“FOLLOWS AN ESTABLISHED PRINCIPLE”

Many of the choices we make are informed by established usability heuristics, design principles, and patterns that have been studied and applied for years. Principles like recognition over recall, progressive disclosure, visual hierarchy, and proximity can give us useful language for explaining why a design works.

This is also where the decision-making framework we discussed earlier in the book becomes especially useful. Your organization’s principles, guidelines, and standards don’t just help you make decisions; they give you a shared language for explaining those decisions to others.

The important thing is not to use a principle simply because it supports the decision you’ve already made. Make sure you understand it and that it genuinely applies to the problem you’re solving.

Whenever possible, connect your decisions to these established principles, guidelines, and standards. That doesn’t mean people won’t question the decision, but it gives you solid footing for the conversation. Instead of debating personal preferences, you can discuss whether the principle applies and whether there’s a good reason to deviate from it.

Research

Using quantitative data, qualitative research insights, and other third-party research is one of the most compelling ways to justify your design decisions. Here are three common ways to do that:

- “Validated by data”
- “Revealed in testing”
- “Supported by other research”

“VALIDATED BY DATA”

Using quantitative data to support your decisions is often one of the most convincing approaches. Many organizations already have analytics, usage patterns, and other data available, even if they haven’t connected it to design decisions yet. You don’t need perfect data to make a good decision, especially when it’s paired with experience and judgment.

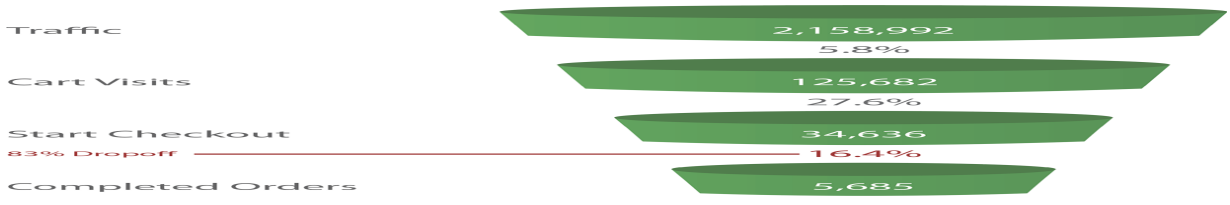
But data can also lead us in the wrong direction. It often tells us *what* users did, but not *why*. We fill in those gaps with assumptions, so it’s important to look at the data in context and treat it as one input, not the only one.

One of my former managers was very data-driven. I noticed that whenever I brought data to support my proposal, she would almost immediately agree. That’s powerful, but also dangerous, because it can be tempting to shape the numbers to support your case even when the connection isn’t that strong. Remember, we’re trying to make the right decision, not simply win the argument.

To introduce data into the conversation, start with a simple statement:

- “According to our analytics, 64% of users drop off at this step.”
- “We have data that suggests the phone number requirement is the biggest barrier to conversion.”
- “We’ve seen a sharp drop in engagement since this change.”

Often, that’s enough, but be prepared to provide the data or follow up with it afterward. When possible, show it visually with a chart, table, or simple graph so stakeholders can quickly understand what you’re seeing.



Having visuals available to show the data is a really effective way to make your case.

“REVEALED IN TESTING”

Often, our decisions are shaped by watching people use our designs from qualitative studies, user interviews, and usability testing. Calling that out is

a powerful way to make your case because it grounds the decision in actual user behavior, not just opinion.
For example:

> "During our usability test last week, we saw several users confuse the 'Okay' and 'Cancel' buttons because they looked too similar."

Unlike quantitative data, qualitative data brings a human element to the conversation. A specific example from a usability session can sometimes be more compelling than charts or metrics. Just be thoughtful about how you characterize what you observed, especially when relying on your own memory or interpretation.
When possible, bring some evidence with you. A short clip, screenshot, or direct quote can make your point much more tangible and give stakeholders a glimpse of real people interacting with the product. Seeing users struggle or succeed firsthand creates empathy and can make the reasoning behind your decisions much easier to understand. I've found that even a single screenshot from a session, accompanied by a direct quote, is very effective.



Including a short video clip or quote from a user session in your slides is an effective way to give stakeholders quick access to real users.

"SUPPORTED BY OTHER RESEARCH"

It's common to reference articles, books, studies, or external research to support our decisions. Over time, these sources shape how we think and design, often without us even realizing it.
You might find yourself saying, "I read recently that…" and then scrambling to remember where it came from. Keep track of useful research so you can easily find it later. Even a simple list with the title, source, and a quick note can be enough.
Like any data, research can sound convincing even when we've misremembered or overstated the findings. Make sure you can back up what you're saying, especially when the decision carries more weight.

And be mindful of how you introduce research into the conversation. Coming in with a stack of evidence can feel one-sided. For higher-stakes decisions, consider sharing materials in advance or bringing multiple perspectives into the discussion. Use research to inform the conversation without overwhelming it with evidence.

Taking hamburger off the menu



Ah, the delicious hamburger menu icon.

On one mobile project, I pushed to replace the “hamburger menu” with the word “Menu,” based on research suggesting it was more effective. Simply saying that wasn’t enough to convince my client. So in one meeting, I came prepared with several articles (some of which even disagreed with my position) and walked through them. That shifted the conversation. The client acknowledged they didn’t have the same level of evidence, and we agreed to run an A/B test to validate the decision. Without that preparation, we likely wouldn’t have revisited the discussion at all.

When using external research to support your decisions, remember to:

- Save useful research as you come across it
- Capture key details (title, author, source, date)
- Add a brief note on why it’s relevant
- Share references when stakeholders ask
- Include research that reflects other perspectives
- Give stakeholders time to review and respond

Limitations

Sometimes our decisions aren't just about what we want to do but what we can do. There are often constraints: technical, organizational, or design standards that shape what's possible. Here are three common ways to respond when that happens:

- "Not enough resources"
- "Limited by technology"
- "Complies with a standard"

"NOT ENOUGH RESOURCES"

The reality is that we can't always build everything we want. There are limits: money, people, time, and internal support. Recognizing those constraints is part of good decision making because spending time on something we can't realistically deliver isn't helpful.

Resources usually come down to some combination of people, money, time, and organizational support. We may be able to design something, but that doesn't mean the organization has the capacity to build, maintain, or support it.

When you explain these limitations, stakeholders will usually react in one of two ways: they'll understand and agree, or they'll push to find more resources. Either way, it's a productive conversation. While it may start with what we *can't* do, the goal is to shift the focus to what we *can* do within those constraints and move forward in a meaningful way.

At the same time, this is part of advocating for your work. Clearly outlining limitations can open the door to conversations about adding resources, adjusting scope, or rethinking priorities. It doesn't mean you're automatically off the hook. It means you're grounding your decisions in reality and helping the team make informed tradeoffs.

"LIMITED BY TECHNOLOGY"

As much as we'd like to design anything we can imagine, we're often limited by the technology available to us. Something may be possible in theory but unreliable, too expensive, or unsupported by the platform we're working with.

These constraints can include server or network limitations, browser or device capabilities, third-party platforms, or technologies that simply aren't mature enough yet. AI-generated designs can create this problem too, producing convincing prototypes that assume capabilities, data, or integrations that don't actually exist. Something appearing possible in a prototype doesn't necessarily make it feasible in production.

These limitations can be difficult to explain, especially when a stakeholder points to another product and asks, "Why can't we do that?" Help stakeholders understand what's possible within the constraints, where those constraints are affecting the experience, and what tradeoffs you can make together.

Third-party integrations

On one project, we were integrating our software into another product that many of our customers already used. We wanted the experience to feel as seamless and capable as our standalone product, but we didn't control the platform. Much of our experience had to run inside an embedded browser with limited capabilities, which meant some interactions simply weren't possible or didn't work the way we wanted them to.

Stakeholders would reasonably ask why certain interactions felt compromised or why we couldn't make them work like they did elsewhere in our product. We had to explain which decisions were actually design choices and which were consequences of the environment we were designing within.

We weren't using technical limitations as an excuse for a weaker experience. We were trying to create the best experience possible within constraints we couldn't change. Once stakeholders understood the difference, the tradeoffs became much easier to discuss.

"COMPLIES WITH A STANDARD"

Sometimes stakeholder requests conflict with the technical or accessibility standards we need to follow. If we want our product to work across devices, browsers, and for all users, we have to design within those constraints.

A common example is accessibility. It affects the types of controls we use and how interactions are implemented. We may start with an ideal design but adjust it during implementation to ensure it works for everyone. While

almost anything is technically possible, it's not always practical—or responsible—to build it that way.

Another example is native UI controls. A stakeholder might want a custom component, but building and maintaining one may not be worth the effort. In some contexts, using a native component is better for users and more efficient for the team.

These standards aren't arbitrary. They exist to improve usability, maintainability, and long-term reliability, helping us make better decisions even when they require tradeoffs.

Hopefully, you can see how design decisions across different projects often share similar reasoning. As articulate designers, it helps to have a set of common messages to draw from and adapt to the situation.

The real advantage of building a library like this is that you don't have to figure out what to say from scratch every time. When you recognize that a decision improves consistency, follows an established principle, is supported by research, or is limited by technology, you already have a starting point for explaining it. That frees you to focus on the conversation itself: listening, responding, and adapting your message to the people in the room.

Over time, you'll develop your own library of messages based on the kinds of decisions you make most often. Keep track of the explanations that work and reuse them. The more familiar they become, the easier it is to articulate your thinking naturally in the moment.

At this point, we've defined our objective, established a strategy, explored tactics, and built a library of messages to support our thinking. We have all the pieces; now we need to put them together into a complete response. In the next chapter, we'll do exactly that with a framework I call the IDEAL Response.

[15]

The IDEAL Response



We've looked at strategies for making a compelling case, tactics for putting those strategies into action, and common messages for articulating our decisions. Now it's time to bring those pieces together into a complete response.

To do that, I use a simple framework called the IDEAL Response. It helps ensure that our response addresses the things stakeholders need to hear while moving the conversation toward support and agreement. The framework brings the most important parts of a strong response together into five easy-to-remember steps:

Identify the problem

Conversations often drift because of lack of alignment on the problem. Briefly restate the problem your design addresses to anchor the discussion and make sure everyone is on the same page.

Describe your solution

Clearly connect your design to the problem you're solving. Show what you did and how it addresses the issue. Without that connection, the design loses its impact.

Empathize with the user

Bring the focus back to the people using the product. Stakeholders can lose sight of them, so it's your job to represent their needs. Show how your solution improves the experience for a specific user.

Appeal to the business

Tie your decisions to business outcomes. Explain how your solution supports goals, metrics, or key performance indicators (KPIs), and demonstrate the value it creates for the organization.

Lock in agreement

Make sure everyone is clear about what happens next. Ask directly for agreement to move forward rather than allowing the conversation to end without a decision.

From IDEA to IDEAL

Getting support to move forward is the entire purpose of this book. Without it, everything you present is just an IDEA. You can make a strong case and communicate your position clearly, but if your stakeholders aren't willing to move forward with you, the work goes nowhere.

That's why locking in agreement is so critical. Agreement doesn't mean everyone has to personally prefer your solution or agree with every detail. It means you've reached enough alignment to make a decision and move forward. That's what turns an IDEA into something truly IDEAL—something actionable that can actually be built.

Throughout this book, I've made a distinction between agreement and support. Support is ultimately what we're after. But asking for agreement forces the conversation to a point of clarity: *Are we ready to move forward, or is there something we still need to resolve?* That's worth spending a little more time on before we put the entire response together.

ASKING DIRECTLY

To get agreement, you have to ask for it. The simplest way is to say, "Do you agree?" But what you're really asking is whether there's enough

support to move forward. Put your stakeholders in a position where they need to respond before you move on.

Design discussions can easily drift into a stream of ideas until the conversation naturally shifts to the next topic. But if you don't have clarity yet, don't move on. Pause and ask directly: "Before we move on, are we in agreement to move forward with this?"

That moment of clarity matters. A clear, verbal agreement helps prevent the same discussion from resurfacing later because no one was sure what was actually decided.

HIGHLIGHTING BENEFITS OR TRADEOFFS

In addition to being direct, frame your question in a way that makes the right choice clear. The goal is to guide stakeholders toward agreement by emphasizing what matters.

You can do this by highlighting either the benefits of moving forward or the tradeoffs of not doing so. For example: "Do you agree that we should remove these fields with the goal of improving conversion?" This reinforces the intended outcome and makes agreement the natural response.

CREATING CLARITY

Asking direct questions like this creates clarity, but more importantly, it invites candor. When you ask, "Do you agree?" you're not just looking for approval. You're giving stakeholders a clear opportunity to say what they actually think. And if they disagree, that's not a problem—it's the point.

The real risk isn't disagreement. It's quiet, unspoken disagreement. When people move on without being clear, those concerns tend to resurface later, often when it's more costly and harder to address.

By inviting a direct response, you bring those concerns into the open while there's still time to work through them. In this way, disagreement becomes a tool. It gives you better information, helps you ask better questions, and creates a more productive conversation. If someone still disagrees at this stage, don't just push harder. Walk back through the response. Are you aligned on the problem? The user? The business outcome? The disagreement may tell you exactly where the real gap is.

Making a Transition

Before you respond, take a moment to set it up. A good transition helps reset the conversation, shows that you were listening, and prepares stakeholders for what you're about to say. Keep it brief. A good transition simply guides stakeholders from what they said into your response.
This is also a good opportunity to lead with a yes. Acknowledge something useful in what you heard, briefly reflect the concern or idea, and then transition into your response. You don't need to repeat every point or agree with everything that was said. You're simply signaling that you heard them and are ready to build on the conversation.
Here are some simple examples:

- "Yes, I see what you mean about the grid view. Let me walk you through how we approached that decision."
- "That's a good point about the differences between these options. Let me explain some of the thinking behind them."
- "I agree that we need to make this easier for users. Let me show you how we're trying to accomplish that here."

The point is simple: don't jump straight into defending your work. Acknowledge what you heard, find a point of connection, and then guide the conversation into your response.

Example IDEAL Responses

Now let's bring everything together into a complete response. The examples that follow use the IDEAL framework to connect our decisions to the problem, the user, and the business while drawing on the strategies, tactics, and common messages we've covered in the previous chapters. Each also begins with a natural transition that acknowledges the feedback and creates a point of connection before responding. You won't use every technique every time. These examples show how the pieces can work together naturally to make a clear and compelling case.
What follows are several case studies demonstrating the IDEAL Response in action. Each one reflects a common type of stakeholder feedback and shows how to clearly articulate your design decisions.

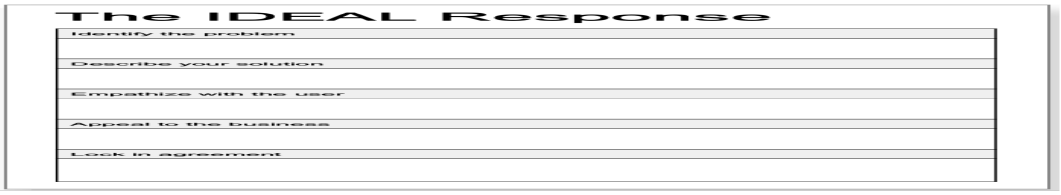
I may or may not have encountered these situations myself. I can neither confirm nor deny it! The names of design patterns and UI controls have been changed to protect their innocence.
For simplicity, I've kept the context minimal. These scenarios should feel familiar enough on their own. Focus less on the specifics of each example and more on how the response communicates value in a way that resonates with stakeholders.

"ADD TO CART" INTERACTION	
Transition	"Thanks for walking through your feedback with us. I hear your concerns about the two-button approach, and I'd like to explain how we arrived at this interaction."
Identify the problem	"Right now, users are confused by having two buttons up front. They're not sure what each one means or which to choose and it's causing hesitation."
Describe the solution	"We've simplified this to a single 'Add to Cart' button. Once they tap it, they can make additional selections as needed, rather than deciding everything at once."
Empathize with the user	"Many of our users are placing quick orders in busy environments. They don't have time to evaluate multiple options—they need a clear, immediate action."
Appeal to the business	"Even though this adds an extra step, it removes hesitation at the start. We expect more users to move forward, which should improve conversion."
Lock in agreement	"I know we've used the current approach for a while, but we believe this will perform better, and we can validate it with an A/B test. Do you agree we should move forward with this approach and validate its impact on conversion?"
OVERBRANDING	
Transition	"Thanks for calling out the opportunity to strengthen the brand here. I hear the desire to make this feel more on-brand, and I'd like to walk through how we approached it."

Identify the problem	“The challenge is finding the right balance between strengthening the brand and keeping the primary content easy to navigate.”
Describe the solution	“We’ve intentionally used color, typography, and spacing to reinforce the brand without adding elements that compete with the primary task.”
Empathize with the user	“Imagine you’re a user coming to this page to complete a task. The more visual elements we introduce, the more there is to process before you can get into the flow.”
Appeal to the business	“Our goal is to create a new revenue stream for add-on services when users enter the flow. Keeping the interface clear gives those actions more room to stand out while still reinforcing the brand.”
Lock in agreement	“I’d recommend we keep the branding more restrained so the experience stays clear and focused. Do you agree this is the right approach?”
PHONE NUMBER COLLECTION	
Transition	“Thanks for raising the idea of collecting phone numbers. I hear the value in having that data, and I’d like to walk through what we’re seeing and how it impacts the experience.”
Identify the problem	“Right now, requiring a phone number is causing a significant drop-off during onboarding, when our primary goal has been to improve onboarding completion rates.”
Describe the solution	“We’re recommending removing the phone number field altogether and instead making it optional or collecting it later, after users have already completed the flow.”
Empathize with the user	“Imagine you’re a new user trying to get started. At this point, we’re asking you for information before you understand why we need it. It creates hesitation and for many users, that’s enough to stop entirely.”

Appeal to the business	“Typically, keeping forms simpler improves completion rates simply because users have fewer distractions. We have research that shows removing the phone number field from similar flows results in an improvement of as much as 30%. By removing that friction, we can increase completion rates while still giving ourselves opportunities to collect that data later.”
Lock in agreement	“Do you agree that we should remove the field for now and look for an opportunity to collect that information later?”
TOO MANY MESSAGES	
Transition	“Thanks for sharing all these ideas around messaging. I hear the desire to communicate more clearly with users, and I’d like to walk through how we’re approaching that.”
Identify the problem	“The challenge is that showing too many messages at once can overwhelm users and make it harder to focus on what actually matters.”
Describe the solution	“Instead of displaying everything at once, we’re prioritizing messages based on importance and showing them at the right moment—so users only see what’s most relevant.”
Empathize with the user	“Imagine you’re a user and you see multiple alerts, banners, and messages all at once. It becomes difficult to know what deserves your attention.”
Appeal to the business	“When users can clearly understand what’s important, they’re more likely to take the right action. Prioritizing messages helps reduce confusion and improves our overall goal for engagement.”
Lock in agreement	“I’d recommend we focus on prioritizing and sequencing these messages rather than showing everything at once. Do you agree that we should prioritize these messages so shoppers can more easily understand what matters most?”
USERS TOLD US	

Transition	“Thanks for sharing that feedback from users. I hear the concern, and I’d like to walk through what we learned and how we’re thinking about it.”
Identify the problem	“The challenge is that we have feedback and data coming from several different sources, and we need to understand how this particular feedback fits into the broader picture before deciding what to prioritize.”
Describe the solution	“We’re looking at this holistically—combining user feedback with usage data and observed behavior—to guide the design decisions rather than reacting to isolated comments. We also maintain a standard process for vetting and evaluating feedback, to ensure we’re prioritizing the right things each quarter.”
Empathize with the user	“The feedback is still telling us something important about what this user is trying to accomplish, so we don’t want to dismiss it. We want to understand whether other users are experiencing the same problem and, if so, how significant it is.”
Appeal to the business	“By focusing on patterns across multiple sources of evidence and our agreed upon processes, we can make decisions that scale across more users and lead to more consistent outcomes. This ensures we’re not just taking custom feature requests, but actually building the right product for our customers overall.”
Lock in agreement	“I’d suggest we use this feedback as a data point, but continue to prioritize patterns we’re seeing across users. Do you agree that’s the right approach?”



You can download a blank worksheet to write your own IDEAL response from my website at *http://tomgreever.com/resources*.

Using AI to Form an IDEAL Response

AI tools can be a helpful way to think through how you might apply the IDEAL framework in a given situation. I've had good results by asking my favorite AI assistant to draft an initial response using the IDEAL framework. This is a great way to practice, get some good ideas, and gain confidence in how you represent your work.

For example, you might prompt a tool like this:

> *"Help me respond to stakeholder feedback using Tom Greever's IDEAL framework. The feedback is: [insert feedback]."*

Or, if the model isn't familiar with the framework, you can include it directly:

> *"Use this structure: Identify the problem, Describe the solution, Empathize with the user, Appeal to the business, Lock in agreement…."*

In many cases, AI will generate a strong starting point. It can help you explore different ways of framing your response, clarify your thinking, or surface ideas you hadn't considered.

That said, don't use it verbatim. AI can help you draft the response, but being an articulate designer means being able to own it in the room. Adapt it to your voice, your stakeholders, and what the conversation actually needs.

Following a formula like IDEAL might feel a bit contrived at first. And to be clear, you're not likely to be able to say all of this, in this order, every time. These examples are a mouthful. In a real conversation, someone will interrupt you halfway through. You might jump straight to the business impact before talking about the user. That's totally fine.

A Framework, Not a Formula

The IDEAL Response isn't a script; it's a reminder. It's a simple way to keep the important pieces in mind so you can respond clearly and

confidently, without missing something that matters. Whether you follow it step-by-step is less important than making sure you've covered what you need to.

At the end of the day, what matters is communicating in a way that resonates with your stakeholders and moves the work forward. Strategy, tactics, and the IDEAL Response can help you do that in the moment, but good communication doesn't end when the meeting does. What happens afterward matters, too.

In the next chapter, we'll look at how creating visibility into your work can build confidence with stakeholders and keep everyone moving forward together.

[Part V]

Forward Momentum Is the Goal

[16]

Visibility Builds Confidence

Throughout my career, I have consistently received positive feedback for a deceptively simple habit: keeping people in the loop. It has always felt natural to provide frequent updates, even at the risk of creating a little noise, because I wanted to make sure my peers, teams, and leaders understood what was happening and had opportunities to participate in the process with me. It seems simple enough that I've often been amused by how much impact such common practices appeared to have.

Over time, though, I realized the real value wasn't in the status updates or follow-up messages themselves. Those were just tactics. The real outcome was that these practices gave everyone visibility into my work, and that visibility gave them confidence in what my teams and I were doing. In fact, in previous editions I called this chapter "Following Up," but I've since realized that's only the tactic. The real value is creating confidence through visibility.

Design can feel like a mystery for people outside of it. Ideas go in, mockups come out, but few people really understand what happens in the middle. That's why stakeholders tell us to "work our magic" because the process itself feels elusive. Design can seem like a black box. And in organizations with deadlines, pressure, and real business stakes, a black box can also feel risky. When our leaders don't understand what's happening, they start asking questions: *Do they understand the urgency?*

Did they forget what we decided? What have they been doing over there in designland?

It makes sense when you think about it. Humans tend to fear what they don't understand. An articulate designer makes that thinking visible. When you open your process to the people involved, they become far more confident in you and your team.

That's why visibility gives people confidence. When stakeholders can clearly see progress, understand what decisions were made, and know what happens next, they become much more comfortable moving forward. They're less likely to overrule decisions, more likely to support the work, and better prepared for future conversations. This doesn't require endless updates or documentation. It simply means creating enough visibility that people feel informed, aligned, and confident in the direction of the work.

Throughout this chapter, we'll look at several ways to maintain that visibility after the meeting ends: following up quickly, reducing ambiguity, filtering through conflicting feedback, managing expectations, and helping projects continue moving forward even when decisions are messy or incomplete.

The Meeting After the Meeting

Let's start with the time immediately following the meeting. For whatever reason, people don't always say what they're really thinking in front of a group. Sometimes they don't want to challenge the boss publicly. Other times, they're worried their perspective might be unpopular or risky to the room. So instead, they wait until the meeting ends, pull you aside, and tell you what they actually think.

It's amazing how many important decisions happen immediately after the meeting. These conversations are often your best opportunity to resolve unfinished concerns, gain clarity, and build support with the people who can help move the work forward.

POST-MEETING POPULARITY

I was once in a meeting with an executive to review the implementation of a design that had already been approved. The meeting itself was fine. Nothing major happened. But immediately afterward, once the executive left, several folks stayed behind specifically to talk to me.

One person asked me to keep her in the loop so she could better support me in future meetings. Another encouraged me to move forward on a previous decision even without explicit executive approval because he wanted to keep the project moving. A third apologized for missing earlier discussions and asked to meet separately to share concerns and become more involved. None of those conversations likely would have happened if I had rushed off to my next meeting.

Whenever possible, stick around for a few minutes afterward. Chat with people. Thank them for participating. See what concerns surface once the pressure of the formal meeting disappears. If you work remotely, the same thing can happen by staying on the call for a few extra minutes or sending someone a quick message to debrief afterward. A surprising amount of momentum gets created after the meeting is technically over.

Following Up Fast

As soon as possible (preferably within an hour, or at least the same day) send a follow-up to the team. It doesn't need to be polished or beautifully written. Speed and clarity matter more than polish. You want to follow up while the conversation is still fresh in everyone's mind, including your own, before they forget details or begin interpreting decisions differently.

A quick follow-up does several important things at once. First, it demonstrates that the meeting mattered and that the work is moving forward intentionally. Second, it keeps everyone aligned by creating a shared record of what was discussed and decided. Third, it shows stakeholders that you were listening and taking their feedback seriously enough to capture and communicate it clearly. And finally, it creates visibility into what happens next.

I can't overstate how valuable these follow-ups have been for me months later when someone asks, "When did we decide that?" A quick search often prevents us from having the entire conversation again. I've even had leaders forward my updates directly to other teams or executives, so they tend to travel farther than you expect.

Your follow-up should usually include three things:

- A quick thank-you for their time and participation
- A short recap of the important decisions or discussions

- Clear next steps, actions, owners, or unresolved questions

Of these, the next steps matter most. People want to know what happens now. Momentum comes from clarity. Even if all the answers aren't available yet, communicating what's happening next reassures them that progress is being made.
Don't be afraid to assign action items or call out responsibilities clearly. If someone volunteered to investigate an issue, follow up with another team, or provide additional information, document it and tag them. Be specific about who owns what and when the team expects to know more.
Ambiguity tends to linger unless someone actively resolves it or assigns it. Here's a simple example:

> Thanks everyone for the productive conversation today. Here are the key decisions and next steps:
>
> - Jon is adjusting the homepage transition timing to 100ms.
> - I'm reviewing the pricing hierarchy in Best Sellers for consistency, will follow up Tuesday.
> - Abdul is investigating the category tree data issue with data science.
> - Jennifer is confirming updated CTA copy with the content team on Wednesday.
> - QA will provide a release readiness update tomorrow.
>
> I will work all of this into the design revisions for next week's meeting to keep everything on track.

Keep updates short, specific, and easy to skim. Although my AI-generated notes include similar information, I find it more helpful to write these concise updates myself because I have a better sense of what's important to highlight. Stakeholders should be able to quickly understand what changed, what was decided, and what happens next without getting buried in unnecessary detail. If more context is needed, you can always link to fuller notes, tickets, recordings, or documentation elsewhere.

Applying Filters

Another important post-meeting skill is learning how to filter information. Not everything said in a meeting deserves equal weight, and not every comment needs to be repeated to the entire team. Part of creating visibility is knowing how to reduce clutter without ignoring valuable input.

People think out loud, riff on ideas, and wander into tangents and hypotheticals. That's OK. Allow them to explore and participate in the discussion. But when it comes time to summarize the meeting or document next steps, use your judgment to decide what actually needs to move forward. Some concerns deserve more discussion. Others can safely fall away.

Your follow-up should create clarity, not recreate the meeting. If you include every stray comment or off-topic suggestion, the important decisions become harder to see. Part of good design leadership is knowing what deserves to be carried forward and what doesn't.

USING DISCERNMENT

I was once in a meeting when one particularly charismatic stakeholder jumped into the conversation with a wildly ambitious idea. He wasn't directly part of the team, but he was influential and known for thinking big. As the discussion unfolded, his suggestion became increasingly unrealistic and far outside the scope of the project. For a few minutes, the entire room entertained the idea, asked questions, and brainstormed around it, but it was clear to me that no one seriously believed it was a priority.

After the meeting, when I sat down to write the follow-up, I intentionally left the idea out entirely. It was included in the detailed notes, but I chose to exclude it from the summary and action items. While well-meaning, from my perspective it was a distraction from the core work. Leaving it out was a risk, but I also knew that if it were truly important, someone would bring it up again. No one ever did.

Moments like this require judgment. Not every idea deserves permanence simply because it was mentioned out loud in a meeting. Part of maintaining momentum is recognizing which conversations move the project forward and which risk unnecessarily distracting the team.

To help assess what feedback actually needs to be carried forward, I usually ask myself a few questions:

- What are this person's intentions? Are they seriously advocating for this idea or simply thinking out loud?
- Do others seem aligned with it? Read the room and pay attention to whether the idea is gaining traction or quietly fading away.
- How influential is this person in the actual decision-making process? Some opinions carry more organizational weight than others.
- Is this likely to come up again? If so, you may need to address it directly instead of simply hoping it disappears.

This doesn't mean ignoring people or making them feel dismissed. I still listened carefully, asked questions, and treated the idea respectfully in the moment. People want to feel heard, even if every suggestion doesn't become part of the plan.

Seeking Out Champions

Just like the meeting after the meeting, there are often people you'll want to connect with afterward one-on-one. You might walk back to their desk with them, invite them to continue the conversation later over coffee, or send a direct message afterward to debrief while the discussion is still fresh.

These conversations give space to share thoughts they may not have been comfortable expressing in front of the larger group. They can also help you better understand team dynamics, organizational pressures, and concerns that weren't obvious during the meeting itself.

As we saw in Chapter 7, these one-on-one conversations are also a good way to strengthen your support network. I'm surprised by how often someone I barely know will offer support or advocacy after a meeting once we've had a chance to talk more directly. When you find those people, invest in the relationship. Keep them informed and give them visibility into the work.

Do Something, Even If It's Wrong

When I was a kid, my dad and I built a treehouse together. I remember one moment when he was standing on a ladder holding a heavy board in place

and accidentally dropped his tools. I froze. I didn't know what to do. Should I grab the tools? Help hold the board? Just wait for instructions? After a few painful seconds, he yelled, "Well, do something! Even if it's wrong!"

That became one of my dad's catch phrases growing up. The idea was simple: when the path forward isn't perfectly clear, it's usually better to take action than remain stuck in indecision.

I wouldn't recommend applying this logic to too many of life's important decisions, but this kind of thing happens in design meetings all the time. Discussions end without clear resolution. No one feels strongly enough to make the final call. Everyone wants consensus, but no obvious solution emerges. And so the work stalls while everyone waits for someone else to decide.

In those situations, I've found it's often better to make the decision yourself and communicate it clearly in the follow-up. Even if the decision turns out not to be perfect, movement creates momentum. Ambiguity creates drag. And if you get it wrong, people will tell you.

There's a similar idea called the McDonald's Theory, proposed by Jon Bell. When a group can't decide where to eat, suggest McDonald's. Suddenly, everyone has an opinion. Jon says, "Anne Lamott advocates 'shitty first drafts,' Nike tells us to 'Just Do It,' and I recommend McDonalds [sic] just to get people so grossed out they come up with a better idea."[1] Sometimes people don't fully understand their own preferences until they're reacting to a concrete option.

The same thing happens with design decisions. When everyone stays vague and noncommittal, the conversation can drift endlessly. But once someone proposes a clear direction, people become much more capable of reacting, refining, and contributing.

If you're faced with ambiguity, take the lead. Choose the direction you believe is best and communicate it clearly to the team. Be specific. Explain your reasoning. Give everyone an opportunity to respond. Sometimes I'll even say something like, "If no one objects by tomorrow afternoon, I'm going to move forward with this direction." You may hear nothing at all. Or suddenly they will have strong opinions they weren't willing to express before. Either way, the project moves forward.

It’s not a perfect science, but our work often requires someone willing to create clarity before perfect certainty exists. Remember: do something, even if it’s wrong.

Managing Expectations

In a way, creating visibility is about managing expectations: expectations about the work, the process, the timeline, and the outcomes. Your ability to clearly communicate what’s happening and why is often more important than delivering the perfect solution. This becomes especially important when projects change direction, priorities shift, or stakeholders become uncertain about where things are headed. I’ve seen projects struggle not because the design work was bad but because leadership lost confidence in the process.

The clearest example was a designer on my team named James. He was talented, energetic, and full of ideas. We hired him to help lead the design of a brand-new product with little internal support and a lot of organizational uncertainty around it. The team had concerns about how it would affect their workflows and whether the product was even the right direction in the first place. The problem was that James treated those concerns as resistance to the work rather than uncertainty he needed to address.

Whenever stakeholders questioned the product or expressed hesitation, James became defensive. He believed the work should speak for itself and often treated skepticism as ignorance rather than uncertainty that needed to be addressed. I spent a lot of time coaching him through these situations because the real problem wasn’t the quality of the work, it was the growing disconnect between him and the team.

But under pressure, James’s instinct was to produce more. More features. More revisions. More design work. He believed that if the product became good enough, everyone would eventually understand and support it. Instead, the opposite happened. The more disconnected stakeholders felt from the process, the less confidence they had in the direction of the work. Eventually, I had to let him go.

Afterward, I took over the project myself, but my focus wasn’t immediately on redesigning the product. It was on rebuilding confidence. I started meeting directly with stakeholders, listening to concerns,

documenting priorities, and creating visible lists of upcoming work, tradeoffs, and timelines so everyone could see what was happening and why. When priorities changed, I explained why. When timelines slipped, I communicated early. When decisions were difficult, I invited people into the process. Slowly, the atmosphere around the project changed.

Over time, the team became more patient and supportive even though progress was objectively slower for a period of time. Why? Because they finally had visibility into the process. They understood the direction, felt included in the decisions, and trusted that the work was moving forward intentionally, even if it wasn't happening as quickly as they would have liked.

Reflecting on the importance of visibility in our work, one of the biggest takeaways for me has been that momentum is *emotional*. Projects rarely lose momentum all at once. More often, it fades slowly through uncertainty and silence. People become unclear about priorities, disconnected from decisions, or unsure whether progress is actually happening. Once that confidence begins to erode, even good work starts to feel risky.

Most stakeholders aren't expecting perfection. They want to know that the work is moving forward thoughtfully and intentionally. The notes, action items, conversations, and updates are simply ways of making that progress visible.

And yet even when we communicate clearly and maintain the confidence of our stakeholders, we still don't control every decision. The work will change. Stakeholders will ask for things we disagree with. Priorities will shift. Sometimes, despite everything we've done, the outcome won't be the one we wanted.

In the final chapter, we'll confront that reaclity directly: how do we deal with changes we disagree with, even after we've done everything we can to make a compelling case?

1 Jon Bell, "McDonald's Theory," April 29, 2013, *http://bit.ly/1EnqiOD*.

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Dealing with Changes

After everything we've covered, it seems appropriate to end this book by returning to the opening question: *Have you ever had to make changes to your design work you disagreed with?* Yes, of course you have. We all have. Part of working with stakeholders is learning how to deal with changes. No matter how thoughtful your process is, how polished your designs are, or how much research supports your decisions, people are still going to ask you to change things. Sometimes those requests will make perfect sense. Other times they'll feel frustrating, arbitrary, or completely disconnected from the actual user experience.

Early in our careers, it's easy to interpret these requests as failure. We think, "If they really understood the design, they wouldn't want to change it." Or worse, we assume that disagreement means the stakeholder doesn't understand design at all. But over time, I've realized that changes are not usually a sign that the process is broken. In many ways, they are the process.

In this chapter, we'll look at why people ask for changes, what might be happening underneath their feedback, and how to respond when we disagree. Sometimes the right response is to stand by our decision. Sometimes it's to adapt. And sometimes we have to accept that we might be wrong.

Making Room for Participation

Our stakeholders expect to participate in our design process. Design meetings themselves, in fact, invite participation. And participation often takes the form of suggestions, reactions, questions…*and changes*. For many people, contributing feedback is how they demonstrate engagement with the work. They want to be involved in the outcome and confident that their concerns, priorities, and perspectives are represented in the final product.

That doesn't mean every requested change is correct. Feedback can point to a real problem, reveal business context we don't yet understand, or simply reflect the pressures and expectations a stakeholder brings into the conversation. Sometimes it's less about the design at all and more about their need to participate and contribute.

Changes Are the Purpose, Right?

Even the way we frame these meetings can reinforce that expectation. We call them things like "Design Review" and explicitly ask stakeholders for feedback. It's not unreasonable for someone to assume that finding something to change is the entire purpose of the meeting. Right?

This is closely connected to the idea of bike-shedding, or what Parkinson called the "*Law of Triviality*."[1] People tend to spend disproportionate amounts of time discussing small, easy-to-understand details rather than more complicated or important parts of the system. Sometimes feedback focuses on a tiny visual issue not because it's critical but because it's accessible to comment on.

Over the years, designers have even developed humorous ways of dealing with this phenomenon. One is known as "*painting a duck*."[2] According to the story, a game artist became frustrated that stakeholders always requested revisions no matter how polished the work was, so he intentionally added an absurd animated duck next to another character. During review, the stakeholder immediately focused on removing the duck, declared the rest of the design great, and the artist avoided a long list of additional revisions.

Disney animators reportedly used a similar tactic in the 1940s by intentionally drawing arm hair on character concepts they didn't want approved. The art directors would predictably reject those versions with

"*hairy arms*," allowing the animators' preferred designs to survive with fewer changes.[3]



I apologize if you're so distracted by this duck that you're unable to focus on reading.[4]

Obviously, we shouldn't deceive or manipulate our stakeholders in these ways,[5] but these stories are funny because they reflect something real: people often feel compelled to react to whatever is most visible or easy to critique. That doesn't make the feedback malicious or unintelligent. Participation itself is part of the social dynamic of design reviews. Understanding that can change how we react. Instead of treating every request as a threat to the work, we can recognize that participation is simply part of the process.

What's Really Going On?

Being asked to make changes we disagree with is exactly the situation we're trying to avoid. So when a stakeholder insists on a change we disagree with, our first instinct is often to focus on the change itself. But the request is only what we can see. Before reacting, it's worth asking what might actually be happening underneath it.

THERE IS A MISUNDERSTANDING

Sometimes there's just a misunderstanding. Maybe the stakeholder misunderstood the context, missed part of the explanation, or interpreted the design differently than we intended. But the misunderstanding can go the other direction, too. They may have information we don't have, or be responding to a constraint or need they haven't fully articulated. Sometimes they don't even realize we're missing that context because it seems obvious from their perspective.

Other times, the goals of the project may have quietly shifted over time without everyone fully realizing it. What once solved the right problem may no longer align with the current priorities. In those situations, the

disagreement is often less about the interface itself and more about misalignment around the problem we're solving.

YOUR DESIGNS ARE NOT THE BEST SOLUTION

Other times, we need to accept the uncomfortable possibility that our solution may not actually be the best one. Stakeholders often have business context, customer knowledge, or organizational information that we don't. Just as they extend trust to us as design experts, we also have to learn when to extend trust back to them. Trusting a stakeholder doesn't mean blindly implementing an idea without thinking; it means trusting that their underlying concern is rooted in a real problem that the team needs to solve together.

THEY HAVE A NEED THAT ISN'T BEING MET

Sometimes the issue is that they have a need that isn't being met. I once worked with an executive who insisted we add social media activity to the homepage of an application. From a UX perspective, it made very little sense. But after talking through it more carefully, I realized he really just needed fast access to that information throughout the day. Giving him a bookmarked dashboard solved the problem without compromising the product experience for everyone else.

However, it's not always that simple. If you suspect there's an underlying need that your stakeholder isn't expressing, you'll need to work harder to uncover their motivations and find a way to address their needs, like we discussed in Chapter 5.

THEY ARE COMPLETELY UNREASONABLE

Of course, there's another explanation that's easy to reach for: this person is just completely unreasonable. No matter what we say or how carefully we make our case, they'll insist on getting their way.

Years ago, I came across this statistic that roughly 4% of the population are sociopaths[6] and was intrigued. As I began to dig deeper, I was shocked to find another source suggesting that sociopathic personalities may be four times more common among executives![7] I'd worked with plenty of stakeholders I had shrugged off as unreasonable or difficult because I figured that was just part of the job. Now, I wondered if I finally had an explanation. *"I knew it! Maybe they're a sociopath!"*

The more I thought about it, though, the more nuanced it became. Many executives are highly task- and outcome-driven, and those traits can contribute to their success. Their jobs sometimes require them to make difficult decisions without becoming paralyzed by the impact those decisions might have on every individual involved. Someone can exhibit some of these tendencies without being a sociopath at all. It may simply be part of how they've learned to operate in that environment. That makes sense.

More importantly, I realized how little control I had over any of it. I'm certainly not qualified to diagnose anyone, and whether someone is unreasonable, manipulative, sociopathic, or just having a bad day doesn't really change my responsibility. I still have to figure out how to work with them.

Oddly enough, that realization made difficult behavior easier for me to deal with. I could stop trying to explain or change the person and focus instead on what I could control: my own response. And that led me to a much simpler, and much more useful, explanation for a lot of supposedly unreasonable behavior.

THEY WANT TO KNOW THEY'RE BEING HEARD

Believe it or not, this may be one of the most common (and unspoken) reasons people insist on making changes. Sometimes stakeholders keep pushing because they're not convinced that we understand their concern. This isn't unique to stakeholders. We all tend to repeat ourselves, explain ourselves more forcefully, or become more entrenched when we don't believe someone understands our point. Plus, people in authority expect to have authority! So when we immediately defend our choices or explain why their suggestion won't work, it can sound like we're dismissing their perspective rather than listening to it. And when people don't feel heard, they tend to push harder. What looks like unreasonable behavior may actually be an escalating attempt to get their concern into the conversation.

I don't mean to suggest our stakeholders are intentionally trying to control the process. Often this happens unconsciously when they don't feel valued in the conversation. If this is happening, we need to communicate that we genuinely value their input and help them understand why another solution may be stronger instead of only defending our own choices. Sometimes the

best thing we can do is pause, go back, and ask them to explain their perspective again. Giving someone space to be heard doesn't mean giving up your position. Often, it's what makes them more willing to hear yours.

The Bank Account of Trust

Beyond delivering good design work, remember that we are also building trust with the people we work alongside. Stephen Covey describes this as an "Emotional Bank Account" in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Every positive interaction becomes a deposit, while negative experiences create withdrawals. When you communicate clearly, follow through on commitments, demonstrate expertise, and help projects succeed, you make deposits. But when you miss deadlines, dismiss feedback, or repeatedly push back on stakeholder concerns, you create withdrawals—even if you believe you're right.

This means that sometimes we need to allow changes we disagree with simply because maintaining the relationship matters more than winning a particular argument. My wife likes to say, "You can either be right, or you can have a relationship." I'll leave you to speculate about the circumstances under which she developed this philosophy.[8]

For our purposes, though, it applies surprisingly well to our work relationships. Proving that we're right at the expense of the relationship makes future decisions harder. Sometimes the better choice is to preserve the trust that helps the team arrive at good outcomes together.

Over time, you want to build enough trust that stakeholders begin assuming your decisions are thoughtful rather than questioning every choice by default. I once had a stakeholder start to challenge part of a design and then stop mid-sentence: "I know Tom usually has good reasons for his choices. Tom, why did you do it this way?" That is incredibly valuable because it shifts the entire tone of the conversation. Instead of defending every decision from scratch, you're now operating from a foundation of trust.

Making Lemonade

It's not always the case that someone else's "bad idea" will ruin the experience. More often, the problem is that we reluctantly implement the

change exactly as requested without doing the harder work of integrating it thoughtfully into the design.

All design involves constraints. We're accustomed to thinking about things like mobile form factors, technical limitations, business requirements, and user needs. But our stakeholders are part of the environment we design within too. Their priorities, requests, and decisions become constraints just like everything else, and part of our skill as designers is learning how to design with them.

In that sense, a requested change is also new data—another input into our decision-making process. Instead of asking, "How do I stop this?" ask, "What's the best design given this new constraint?" We're the ones best equipped to explore the request, understand what's behind it, and integrate it thoughtfully with everything else. Quickly pasting a requested feature into the interface and blaming the stakeholder when it performs poorly isn't good design stewardship.

UNCOVERING OTHER PROBLEMS

I once worked on a mobile app that displayed demographic data in both a list view and a bar chart view. Over time, as the product evolved, the two views gradually became more similar without anyone really noticing. Eventually, a stakeholder requested an additional field be added to the chart view, and while discussing it we realized the two experiences could actually be consolidated into a single, simpler interface. What began as a requested revision ultimately revealed a better solution for the entire workflow.

On another project, a stakeholder had feedback on our validation messaging. While I initially believed their specific copy choice would weaken the experience, I trusted that their concern came from a real operational insight. Instead of arguing endlessly about which approach was correct, we collaborated on running a rapid round of usability tests to observe how users actually engaged with the system. What we discovered was that neither solution actually solved the real problem. The real bottleneck wasn't the validation text at all, but a critical structural flaw earlier in the user flow that neither of us had previously uncovered. Because we used the data to figure out what was actually happening

instead of trying to prove who was right, we were able to look past the surface request and fix the real problem together.

That's why it's important to approach stakeholder changes with curiosity instead of immediate resistance. The request itself may seem wrong, but the conversation around it can reveal a deeper issue that needs attention. If we become defensive too quickly, we risk missing an opportunity to improve the experience. Plan for changes, *because they will happen*. Treat them as another input into the design process and use the conversation to uncover better solutions.

When You're Wrong

We've talked a lot about trust throughout this book. So much of our work depends on building trust with the people we work with. That trust doesn't come only from being persuasive or confidently explaining your decisions. It comes from consistently making thoughtful choices, communicating clearly, and developing a track record of good judgment over time. But eventually, something will go wrong.

Perhaps the metrics didn't improve like you hoped or a release missed expectations. The feature you thought was intuitive ends up confusing users in ways you didn't anticipate. No matter how experienced you are, there will be moments when your solution turns out not to be the right one. And when that happens, you have a choice: own the mistake or try to protect yourself from it.

BUILDING TRUST THROUGH MISTAKES

Ironically, being wrong is often an opportunity to build more trust, not less. People are usually far more forgiving of honest mistakes than they are of defensiveness, blame-shifting, or attempts to hide the problem.

Stakeholders want to know they can trust you to acknowledge reality, take responsibility, and help move the team toward a solution.

Owning a mistake does not mean endlessly apologizing or dwelling on failure. Be clear about what happened, acknowledge your role, and focus on what needs to happen next. Sometimes that means absorbing a certain amount of blame as a leader, even when the problem wasn't entirely your fault. Taking ownership can break the tension and keep the team from getting trapped in arguments about who caused the problem.

Responsibility is not always distributed equally, but people tend to trust those who are willing to own mistakes and focus on solutions instead of self-preservation. In the long run, honesty builds far more credibility than perfection ever will.

KNOWING WHEN YOU'RE WRONG

One of the most difficult parts of admitting you're wrong is recognizing it in the first place. As designers, we naturally become attached to our work. We see our designs as thoughtful solutions we carefully crafted, so it can be difficult to objectively recognize when they aren't working as well as we hoped. So how do you know when you're wrong? There are usually a few clear warning signs.

The problem still exists

Our job is to solve problems, but that doesn't guarantee our solutions will work perfectly. If the original problem still exists after implementing the design, something clearly isn't working. No matter how elegant the interface looks, unresolved problems are a sign that we need to rethink our approach.

Users don't understand it

It's easy to convince ourselves that users "don't get it," especially when we're emotionally invested in a design. But if users consistently struggle, become confused, or fail tasks during testing, we need to accept that the interface, not the user, is the problem.

You don't have support

Designers are not automatically right just because they're designers. If stakeholders, teammates, users, or leadership consistently push back on a direction, it's worth paying attention to that signal. That doesn't mean every disagreement is correct, but when support repeatedly breaks down, it's often a sign that something important is being missed.

Recognizing these moments requires humility. And when we realize we're wrong, the best response is not defensiveness or excuse-making; it's action. Focus on fixing the problem, communicate urgency, propose a path forward, and help the team move toward a better solution.

No matter how experienced you become, people will continue asking for changes to your work. Sometimes they'll be right. Sometimes they'll be wrong. Sometimes you'll discover that neither side fully understood the real problem. Becoming an articulate designer means learning to navigate those moments constructively without becoming defensive, cynical, or rigid in the process.

The Real Work of Design

When I first started working in design, I thought my job was to create great interfaces. And of course, that's still part of it. We should care deeply about craft, usability, accessibility, research, interaction design, and all the details that make products genuinely useful for people.

But over time, I realized that most of the challenges I faced were not actually design problems. They were relationship and communication problems. It was far more human than I expected.

What I've learned is that solving these communication problems is often what allows the design work itself to succeed. When people feel heard, they become more collaborative. When stakeholders understand the reasoning behind decisions, they become more supportive. When teams have clarity, momentum increases. When trust exists, conversations become easier, decisions become faster, and good ideas have a better chance of surviving long enough to make a real impact.

We won't always get our way. We won't always be right. And even when we are, we may not be able to convince everyone else. That was never really the point. Our job is to help people understand the thinking behind our work and move the conversation toward the best outcome we can achieve together. That's why these skills matter so much. They are not separate from the design work. They are the work.

Because in the end, the real work of design is not only arranging pixels on a screen. It's helping people move toward better decisions together. It's creating clarity where there is confusion, building confidence where there is uncertainty, and helping teams navigate complicated problems with empathy, communication, and trust. That's what it means to be an articulate designer: one who can communicate with stakeholders, keep your sanity, and still deliver the best user experience.

1 Wikipedia, “Law of triviality,” *http://bit.ly/1iuD1dW*.
2 Jeff Atwood, Coding Horror Blog, “New Programming Jargon.” July 2012, *http://bit.ly/1JfEtrg*.
3 Melissa Block, All Things Considered, “What’s With All of The ‘Hairy Arms’ in Graphic Design?” November 2014, *https://n.pr/39azjRt*.
4 “tail” is licensed under CC0 1.0. To view a copy of this license, visit *https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/*.
5 It *is* obvious, right?
6 Martha Stout, *The Sociopath Next Door* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005, p. 8).
7 M.E. Thomas, *Confessions of a Sociopath* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2013, p. 184).
8 It’s not what you think. She’s usually referring to our relationship with our kids.

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About the Author



Tom Greever has been designing interfaces and leading design teams for more than 20 years. His experience as both a designer and executive design leader has given him a unique perspective on how communication shapes design decisions and outcomes. He has coached and mentored teams on design practice and communication at large enterprises and scrappy start-ups around the world.

He is available for in-person workshops, online training, and keynotes for teams and conferences. He lives in Illinois with his wife and five kids. He's probably cleaning up the house right now.

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You can also find articles, podcasts, and videos about this topic on his website: *https://tomgreever.com*.

Colophon

The animal on the cover of Articulating Design Decisions is a rose-ringed parakeet (Psittacula krameri). These medium-sized parrots are native to South Asia and central Africa, but their popularity as pets, along with their strong adaptation skills, has allowed them to establish feral populations around the world. While they are known to inhabit a diverse range of climate zones like deserts and rainforests, they have also created large, stable communities in metropolitan cities like London and Tokyo. Made up mostly of escaped birds, these populations seize on the higher ambient temperatures and food availability of their new urban environments.

The rose-ringed parakeet is covered in green plumage that is punctuated by a reddish beak, and has a pointed tail that is longer than half its body length. As a sexually dimorphic species, only the males exhibit the rose-and-black neck rings that give them their name. Besides their physical features, these social and raucous birds can also be identified by their sound, as they often travel in noisy flocks and let out piercing, squawking calls. In fact, they show their aggression towards predators by letting out a soft “purr” sound, which is their only defensive adaptation.

The history of the rose-ringed parakeet in aviculture goes as far back as the ancient Greeks and Romans, who are recorded to have kept certain subspecies as pets. Nowadays, their popularity as pets remains because captive breeding makes new color mutations available, and their ability to mimic human speech continues to intrigue and entertain.

The cover image is a color illustration by Karen Montgomery, based on a black and white engraving from English Cyclopedia Natural History. The cover fonts are Gilroy Semibold and Guardian Sans. The text font is Scala; and the heading font is Gotham.

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