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Practice notes on designing for change

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Abstract

Service Design Projects often require organisations to undergo significant changes in the way they operate. The conditions driving this need for change often create an environment where those people required to under go it have the least capacity for that change, impeding the implementation of re-designed services. Applying a designerly approach to people's capacity to engage with change offers a unique way to overcome these barriers. These practice notes identify ways design interventions including compassion practices might help organisations engage successfully in a change process.

Keywords: service design, organisational change, compassion

Introduction

As a practicing Service Designer I've found that I rarely design services. I actually spend most of my time redesigning services that are not delivering the outcomes organisations desire. This means that in order to implement the new service there are inevitably changes required in how people on

both the front line and in the back office of service delivery operate. The ability for teams and individuals within an organisation to engage in this change process is a critical factor in whether the redesigned service will be successfully implemented. Having seen this change process fail multiple times within my career, I've become interested in exploring how Service Designers can better work with organisations in navigating change more effectively using a human centred design approach.

These practice notes aim to provoke a discussion amongst Service Designers around how we work organisations navigating change and propose some specific interventions, including compassion practices, that designers might consider in practice.

Organisations in distress: The tension between the need for change and the capacity to engage with change

In exploring the conditions in which organisations enter into a change process, either intentionally through a reform project, or unintentionally through a service re-design that challenges the organisation's norms and values, I have become aware of a common organisational context of distress. This distress can take multiple forms but consistently underpins the barriers for both individuals and teams to engage with change processes. In two recent projects on which I've worked, there has been an observable moral distress arising from the fact that the very systems within which the organisations function present ethical challenges to individuals. In the case of a Justice project, an overwhelming workload and a high degree of public scrutiny, coupled with the high human impact of the work, compounded distress for all parties in the system leaving them with feelings of powerlessness and frustration. In a Humanitarian Services organisation, it was a series of international trends and policy changes that led again to an overwhelming workload and feelings of powerlessness leading to high levels of burnout. These distress contexts left the people operating within them in states of anxiety, anger and despair, leading to defensiveness, cynicism and/or disengagement.

These distress contexts are not unique to circumstances where the distress is moral. I worked in the telecommunications sector during and after the dot-com crash of 2001, commonly referred to within the technology sector as the 'tech wreck'. Conditions of extreme market distress saw profits plummet, capital withdrawn from the market and mass rounds of human lay offs as organisations tried to reign in costs in the face

of declining revenue. For individuals and teams going through this experience there was a sudden precarity around their work situation, as well as a dramatic increase in workload due to the loss of team members where similar states of anxiety, anger and despair were palpable. At the time when technology sector organisations most needed to fundamentally change the way they operated, the very conditions requiring this change had left them with a workforce unable to engage with that change.

The result of these distress contexts and the impact they have on the individuals and teams within them is a severely constrained capacity to engage in change, both in terms of cognitive and emotional capacity. The tension between an organisation's need for change and the capacity of her people to engage with it is a fertile space for a design intervention.

Human Centred change: A Design Intervention centred on the distressed individuals confronting change.

Traditional management science approaches have focused on building the skills and knowledge of a workforce to build capabilities in line with an organisation's changing needs. I often observed this through failed change attempts within the technology sector during the 'tech wreck', where skills training for new ways of working was thrown at teams with little capacity to process them. In my more recent projects there is still an observable tendency to want to throw capability building work at individuals and teams as part of the change process, with some capacity building work stapled onto the side. There are emerging trends within management science that are considering well-being and resilience in organisations alongside considerations of change readiness. The element that seems to be lacking is the way in which human wholeness is restored to people within the distress contexts that are driving the need for change.

In this gap lies an important opportunity for a design intervention. One of the strengths of human centred design is the way it addresses the whole human. As a result of this there are practices within design that come to fore. In my own move from business management into design, I was struck by the way designers intentionally cultivated practices, as opposed to a focus on professional knowledge and the acquisition of capability. My own practice has been greatly informed by intentionally crafting my own practices around showing up in a more whole, humanistic way. The impact this has had on me both professionally and personally has been pivotal in helping me transition as a practitioner. It is perhaps not

surprising that I seek to bring this approach to how I work with others undergoing change programs.

I have for several years been building a compassion practice, through Compassion Spirituality, Mindful Self-Compassion, and more recently Compassionate Witness. Through some recent encounters with care industries and examining cultures of care, I have become increasingly interested in the potential for Compassion Practices, and specificallyMindful Self-Compassion, to help individuals and teams build capacity to engage in change. Whilst there is some tentative engagement with mindfulness as a tool to help build organisational resilience and well-being, there has been limited discussion of compassion.

Using Mindful Self Compassion in coaching sessions with key project leaders, I have promoted the three faces of self compassion Neff (2003) laid out, namely: (1) self kindness – extending understanding rather than judgement to oneself; (2) common humanity – viewing ones experiences as connecting, rather than isolating from the larger human experience; and (3) mindfulness – holding painful thoughts in balance rather than over-identifying with them. These conversations usually don't arise in early coaching sessions, but rather after a trusted relationship has been built (which can be as quickly as the third or fourth coaching session depending on the openness of the client). As a practitioner, I'm acutely aware of my posture in these sessions. I am similarly aware of my space-holding, and my application of the three faces of self kindness, common humanity and mindfulness in discussions with the client before we actuallydiscuss this overtly. By firstly modelling this practice to create safety and to begin to build capacity to engage with change, I am then able to relate these principles to the client so that they have a visceral understanding of their power to build capacity for change in the rest of their team and other stakeholders. At this point I bring in a couple of key prompts for the client to use before entering any meetings or conversations about the project, along the lines of "look for the pain behind painful behaviours and respond with kindness", "dial-down judgement and seek out personal connection". I also encourage some light mindfulness techniques like pausing to assess where their energy is at, taking three centering breaths, then reminding themselves of the prompt. In subsequent coaching sessions where we evaluate the progress of implementing changes to the service ecosystem, I will often link back to this Mindful Self-Compassion practice when discussing barriers or failures along the way. I have found that this not only helps these key project leaders engage more willingly with the difficult

aspects of change but also helps them lead their teams through the discomfort and build their own capacity to engage.

I have only recently begun to experiment with Compassionate Witness practices, drawing on the framework and tools developed by Shannon Weber (2018). I have begun running workshops around some key skills and rituals, including how to “create a container” to set boundaries around how to show up sustainably for others in the team as it navigates change and invests in resilience (Weber, 2018). This provides an alternative framing of self-care, to sustain individuals’ capacity to continue engaging with their teams and the change process. Both of these rituals provide a simple structure for individuals to write down both their boundaries and resilience practices as a way of giving themselves permission to continue addressing their own needs, whilst maintaining engagement with their team and the change project. As an emerging element of my practice, I find that I am still calibrating how to build on these tools and to understand how they can best support individuals and teams in building and holding the capacity to engage constructively with change.

In my design practice I continue to explore ways of expanding a designerly application of compassion practices for individuals and teams, to help them grow the capacity to better engage with the changes that Service Design projects require of them. To be able to reflect on their work, to reconsider their roles and relationships within an organisation, and to be able to entertain different ways of working in the delivery of services. I believe there is a greater need for the Service Design community as a whole to interrogate the role designers play in driving organisational change as part of design work.

As an emerging area of my own practice, the cultivation of Compassion Practices has already positively impacted recent projects. This paper is an invitation for other practitioners to consider how they firstly cultivate their own compassion practices as part of their design practice, and secondly how they bring these practices into the workplace.

References

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