## THE SITUATIONS

NOTE

Every one of these situations is a form of healthy conflict, but keep in mind that every healthy conflict can start from or turn into unhealthy conflict. These are good situations to have: They escalate issues that the design team needs to iron out. These situations all represent disparate understanding of key aspects of the project.

## Design ignorance

"I don't see why we even need to spend time on this."

Designers sometimes find themselves defending the practice of design itself. While every designer expects to educate stakeholders and other team members about design fundamentals at some point in the design process, the frustration mounts when every conversation entails justifying the value of design. Sometimes this includes demanding that designers justify the techniques they use. Designers will face conflict every step of the way, spending time defending not just their design decisions and their approach but their mere presence, too.

Designers sometimes presume that everyone on the project team has bought into design. They don't take the time at the outset of the project to educate the team about their role, their value, and their contribution.

## Distracted by internal competition

"The marketing team is setting up their own Web site."

Members of the project team lose focus on project objectives because they are distracted by a competitor. This competitor may be outside the company, but is often inside the organization–a separate team working toward the same, overlapping, or competing objectives. Project teams can't operate efficiently because resources are diverted to "deal with" the competition.

In design, a better product is the best way to beat the competition, especially when other aspects of the situation are beyond the team's control (for example, office politics). Human behavior, however, prioritizes undermining the competition. It can be difficult to deal with this situation when survival instincts kick in, and team members become transfixed by arguing why the other guy is inferior rather than investing in making their own product better.

## Distracted by shiny objects

"Our site needs social sharing functions."

Team members lose focus of project objectives because they see something novel and wonder how it might fit into their project. "Shiny objects" is one term for ideas or technologies or techniques that have captured the imagination of the public or the industry. The implication is that such ideas are flashy but lack substance. In reality, the shiny object may be worthwhile, but there is no motivation for using it.

Design decisions driven by what's new–not by what's needed–are appealing because they're easy to make. But they're not easy to implement or justify. Project resources become diverted to exploring this great new thing and away from solving the core design problem.

One possible consequence is that some team members may never let go of the shiny object. They raise it in every conversation and design review. Team members may see the project as a failure if it doesn't include the shiny new thing.

**Don't know what we need**

"What do you think we should do?"

Despite their best efforts, project teams may not be able to articulate a single clear design problem. While a client need not have a fully fledged assignment at the outset, the design team should be able to state the design problem confidently after a couple discussions. By the time the project is underway, every member of the design team should be able to summarize the objectives and scope of the project.

Without a clear definition of the design problem, the project team may run in different directions. Conflict comes from each member of the team evaluating design directions with a different set of criteria.

Articulating the design problem is perhaps the hardest thing to do in design. Establishing goals and parameters feels very "un-design" to a designer. These efforts, while potentially unpleasant, yield better results because they let the team know what success is.

## Efforts ignored

"This stuff doesn't really matter because we're working on a separate track."

Stakeholders or other members of the team choose to ignore outputs, recommendations, and solutions provided by people assigned those activities. The quintessential example here is a disenfranchised design team–where some team members discount the value of their contributions.

Without alignment on activities and outputs, the team will fragment, wasting time and money. Business stakeholders will also waste time trying to reconcile disconnected efforts.

Disenfranchised teams may have no control over their disconnectedness. It may be driven by politics up the ladder, a defensive colleague, or irrelevant interpersonal conflicts.

## Excluded from planning

"It's a shame she's not in the meeting. All these action items are for her."

In this situation, the people responsible for delivering and executing are not included in the planning process. They may be excluded on purpose–I once worked with someone who was a constant frustration in meetings–or because of logistics.

Here the conflict is that contributors will not have an opportunity to shape their own destiny. They will be unable to perform, thus creating more frustration and perhaps generating more of the behavior that got them excluded from planning in the first place.

A pattern of exclusion generally implies something political or personal beneath the surface. People aren't excluded because they're agreeable and will do anything asked of them. No, they're excluded because one party finds the other difficult to work with, or because the other party represents a threat or loss of control.

## False consensus

"I think we all agree here."

In this situation the team comes to some agreement (on direction or approach, for example) but doesn't really understand the underlying assumptions or the downstream implications. If they understood those, they might not agree.

While a false consensus seems to move the project forward, it likely leads to more challenging conflicts later when the underlying assumptions come to light.

Since everyone appears to agree, it may be difficult to detect that this is a problem.

## Inconsistent expectations

"That's not what I said!"

From one conversation to the next, team members change their expectations. They might have expected the team to work on certain parts of the design, incorporate certain improvements, or reach a certain goal. The team works diligently on the tasks they think they should, only to find that, in the eyes of their colleagues, they focused on the wrong stuff.

But this is more than just "wrong scope." It's the situation where even agreed-upon and understood expectations change from conversation to conversation. Some team members may be bewildered at the change, worrying that they misunderstood the assignment. Some team members may be frustrated, thinking that their requests were not heard.

Such situations see many of the same symptoms as other performance-related situations: perceived incompetence, perceived disorganization, and decreased trust.

It can be easy to blame the "short-term memory loss" of team members. Indeed, it can seem like some people don't remember what they said from one meeting to the next. In one conversation, stakeholders insist one part of the product is a high priority; in the next they wonder why the designers didn't work on this other part. In one discussion, the milestones may be clear; in the next they seem to have shifted.

While this situation can be addressed through documentation–reflecting the desired tasks, goals, or outputs in the form of an email message–even a careful inventory may not prevent these conflicts before they start. The source of the conflict may be

• More fundamental: words may mean different things to different team members

• More subtle: where colleagues object to the level of detail (or lack thereof), the approach used to do the work, or the emphasis across the updates

• More organizational: stakeholders may be experiencing pressure from other parts of the organization that shifts their priorities

## Insufficient progress

"You've done how much?"

The designer hasn't advanced the project forward: assigned tasks remain incomplete, design problems remain unsolved, or feedback isn't fully incorporated. Colleagues will call into question the designer's ability to perform, and lack of progress has a downstream effect on the project budget and schedule.

Insufficient progress rarely has anything to do with laziness. In most cases, lack of progress comes from

- Inability to manage time effectively
- Having too many assignments to juggle
- Inability to ask for help
- Inability to solve the design challenge at hand

Be aware that confronting an underperforming designer can make him or her defensive, undermining confidence and potentially further disrupting progress.

## Irrelevant comparisons

"Have you seen this Web site?"

Here, someone contributes comparative examples with little or no practical relevance to the design problem. Bringing content-heavy Web sites to a brainstorming meeting about a transactional application, for example, distracts the team from the core problem. Products that cater to consumers may not be the best examples for products meant to serve a corporate audience.

Every design process is, no doubt, well served by examples and inspiration from outside the immediate problem. While incorporating examples into the design process is useful, the team must use caution when employing examples that don't relate directly to the design problem. Besides distracting the design team from the problem at hand, irrelevant examples may shift the focus of the project away from the target audience and yield untenable solutions.

In the Web world, for example, everyone wants to be as elegant as Apple.com, effective as Amazon.com, and fun as Zappos.com. Team members stuck on particular examples may react negatively to their dismissal, approaching the design process with increased trepidation.

## Lack of clear inputs

"Mmm... yeah... we're not going to have the budget to do user research."

Designers don't have detailed inputs (requirements, parameters, starting points, constraints, etc.) to help frame the problem and inform the solution. In response to this lack of clear inputs, designers might

- Spin, flounder, or churn on outputs without arriving at their destination
- Stall altogether
- Make rash assumptions without rationale

Experienced designers know what they need, can anticipate risks for moving forward without inputs, and can determine whether they should bother. If they don't recognize this situation, designers face performance issues: they won't meet expectations in the specified deadlines, or they will prepare work without the right inputs.

There are many different kinds of inputs used throughout the design process, and it would be impossible to catalog them all. They range from the very abstract (like underlying business concepts that drive the product design) to the concrete (like the project timeline or color choices). They also vary by their role in the project–educational (where the designer must learn about the domain) or feedback (where the designer is seeking input on rendered ideas).

## Lack of context

"There's a lot going on behind the scenes here..."

Teams do not have insight into the organizational, business, or operational context surrounding a project. Late in the design process, they learn about additional stakeholders, approval processes, or arbitrary business rules. Context is crucial to the success of a design project because it allows designers to gauge what approach, process, and solution will be the best fit. Context establishes constraints, not only for the project, but also for the design itself.

In this situation, the project team runs into unanticipated risks, obstacles, or delays in the design project due to their ignorance of context. Too, stakeholders may see "insulating" the design team as an important responsibility, reluctantly relinquishing that role. They believe that they offer protection from the chaos of the organization. In reality, that chaos offers useful insights to the design process.

## Lack of decision maker

"So, what does the group think?"

Design decisions drag out because no authority is capable of rendering executive decisions when necessary. There are several variations of this situation:

- Authority is diffuse among several stakeholders, and approval requires consensus.
- Authority is centralized on one person, but that person is incapable of making decisions.
- No one has been granted authority to make decisions.
- The sole decision maker is dissociated from the team.

Even a sound strategy cannot automatically validate every design decision. Some design choices require deliberation and a final decision rendered by an authority. This can lead to operational conflict, where people don't know how to move forward. It can lead to creative conflict because other members of the team may have a clear idea for the design direction.

**Lack of stable strategy**

"So, things have changed since we last spoke..."

By "stable strategy" I mean the underlying foundation for the project:

- The **business** that will support the product–the organization, the business process, the way the product adds value, or any number of ways the product fits into the business of the organization.
- The **project parameters** that frame the design effort–objectives, constraints, requirements

In this situation, the project's objectives, parameters, or constraints change regularly. The cause may lie well outside the design team (business stakeholders on high changing direction) but sometimes the design process itself instigates such a change. Either way, the underlying foundation that supports the design effort shifts constantly. Without a reliable foundation, designers will struggle to make decisions.

One variation of this situation is that an underlying foundation never existed. Even the most experienced designers sometimes dive into a project without taking care to define basic project parameters. Designers find themselves floundering not because things are constantly changing, but because they were never defined in the first place. Project participants may work at cross-purposes, precipitating conflict. This conflict may be channeled to nail down a strategy, but if there's no way to ensure the strategy remains stable, the conflict can turn unhealthy.

## Late-breaking requirements

"Now that I think about it, we're also going to need..."

Most design processes spend at least a little time establishing requirements up front. In the early days of Web design, teams prepared elaborate documents describing each and every requirement. These tomes were painstaking, tedious, and hardly ever read. They were thorough, however, and made a good attempt to articulate everything the system should do. Through this formal process, design teams were able to identify the vast majority of requirements. More importantly, they were able to quash any late-breaking requirements. If a requirement didn't arise during the lengthy process, it must not be important enough for this release.

Still, late-breaking requirements occur: the stakeholder who didn't have time to participate in the process; the one thing that one guy forgot; a change to the business that has a ripple effect throughout all the company's systems.

Too often, the requirement comes up at some late stage in the design process and the design team experiences the cognitive dissonance: "That totally makes sense–why didn't I think of that?" and, "Holy crap, we have to rip out half our design work."

Can the design team push back? Will the stakeholders adjust other project parameters (budget? timeline?) to give the team time to accommodate the new requirement? How much analysis should the team do to determine the impact of the new requirement? Attempting to answer these questions can yield a difficult conversation.

Ultimately, the design team must acknowledge whether a new requirement changes the design challenge altogether. Even the subtlest shift in priority can have a dramatic effect on the design solution.

## Misinterpretation of tone

"Your email was really snippy."

Another participant in the conversation, whether in-person or electronic, real-time or asynchronous, breeds hostility or disrespect in the communications. Their responses are positioned relative to the perceived tone, not to the actual content of your message. Unfortunately, some people are wired to read the worst into even the simplest of messages.

When this happens, communication on a project comes to a halt because the recipient can't get past the perceived tone of the message. In this case, the recipient may be as much to blame as the sender.

## New perspectives

"I know I'm coming in with this late, but..."

Sometimes, the worst thing about stakeholders is their timing. Great ideas, great input, useful feedback, and wouldn't it have been great if they'd shown up six weeks ago. Stakeholders may come from any part of the business–strategy, operations, sales, technology, marketing–but their perspective ends up being crucial to project success. This doesn't mean the new perspective is always right, but if they're coming in this late in the game, they must be important enough to worry about.

The project team then faces two challenges:

- Managing expectations with a new stakeholder, who may not understand, appreciate, or care about the project plan.
- Managing incoming feedback that is actually valuable.

The first is always likely; the second is not.

When stakeholders have irrelevant or useless feedback, and it comes in very late in the design process, teams can dispose of it easily enough by pointing to the project schedule. When the feedback is meaningful, useful, and otherwise improves the product, that's a far more difficult situation to handle.

## No plan

"OK, so what do we do next?"

In this situation, the project lacks a plan that defines desired outcomes, activities, schedule, and assignments. As such, no one knows what they're doing week-to-week. They may understand one aspect of a plan, like the project's goals, but not others, like how they're getting there. At worst, plans don't exist at all, and all team members must fly by the seat of their pants. Even the simplest plan can get everyone on the same page, trigger a conversation about coordination, and hold people accountable for their work.

When people don't know what they're doing from day to day or even week to week, they become stressed. They wonder whether they're doing the right thing and whether their work is meaningful. Operational conflict emerges, where people bump into each other or fail to coordinate their activities.

Creating a plan is no small task. Most designers struggle to create a plan and manage their time to execute upon it.

## No time to design

"Just get some rough ideas down by tomorrow, OK?"

Forces outside the design team establish an unreasonable schedule for producing design ideas. They don't account for the time to develop ideas, vet the ideas, and put them into a format suitable for explaining to other people.

Designers confronted with this situation will resent the project team if forced to prepare outputs without sufficient time. If they comply with the unreasonable request, they may find themselves committed to a design concept that doesn't effectively solve the problem. Even if they pull it off, they set an unreasonable precedent for future work.

The design team may be eager to dive into the problem or to prove their value, ignoring the risks that come with shortchanging their process. They may be reluctant to push back on the request because they don't want to disappoint the requestor or undermine their own authority.

**Not a team player**

"I can take care of this."

Someone on the team refuses to engage with other members. If in a position of authority, this person might refuse to delegate or complain endlessly about others' shoddy work. If a contributor, he or she might ignore other people's contributions, refuse to ask for help, or take on tasks outside his or her responsibility.

With one person on the project who refuses to collaborate, other team members cannot contribute effectively. They're met with resistance and dismissal, threatening their performance.

Sometimes this situation is more than a simple lack of cooperation. In the extreme, this situation is about one person constantly positioning people to fail–and not the good kind of failure. In this version of the situation, the only guarantee of success appears to be removing this person. In such untenable situations, other team members may feel like they need to route around the challenging person or reduce the assignment, meeting only minimum requirements.

## Overpreparation

"I think we've got the solution already."

Product teams may create early mock-ups to frame the problem, which locks them into a particular way of thinking about the problem. While getting ideas on paper is a good way of framing the design challenge, vetting initial ideas and validating a common understanding of the problem, it can also stifle further exploration.

In design, too much preparation leaves no room for innovation. By overpreparation, I mean walking into a situation where the design team has thought so much about the problem, and relied so much on pre-existing assets, they can't think about the problem independently of their initial solution.

Good design strategy–the beginning of a design project where the team defines the problem and sets direction–takes the design just far enough to validate the objectives and constraints, and establish an overall vision. When a design concept lingers too long, becoming entrenched, it can cause conflict because some team members may be unwilling to depart from the initial idea.

Overcoming this situation is hard because people tend to prefer familiarity. They may feel a sense of ownership of the design concept and be reluctant to let it go.

**Poorly composed feedback**

"That just doesn't look right to me."

The team receives feedback that doesn't clearly articulate the next steps, the desired improvements, or the issues with the current version. Extracting this information from colleagues is part of the designer's responsibility, but incompatibility among team members makes this process unnecessarily cumbersome.

With poorly composed feedback, the design team will be at a loss for how to move forward. They may be unable to provide direction to other members of the team. Ultimately, they are unable to triangulate their position relative to success, leading to frustrations around performance (Are we adding value?) or operations (Are we communicating right?).

What can make this situation especially difficult is that people may not be aware or willing to admit that they're incapable of providing meaningful feedback. Moreover, designers may not be equipped to ask the right questions. If the project has a history of poor communications, participants may not be able to see past prior failures to capture good feedback.

## Poorly planned presentation or discussion

"I hate to put you on the spot, but..."

Project stakeholders do not understand the design work because the design team hasn't assembled a meaningful narrative. Designers may have been asked to present concepts without sufficient notice, or the design team may have neglected to anticipate questions from the stakeholders. Perhaps they expected one set of participants and a different set showed up. ("The CEO is coming, too. Is that OK?" "Um, it was supposed to be an internal meeting.")

Progress on the design work may be held back until stakeholders buy into the design concept. High-quality work may be undermined by a poor presentation.

Design processes balance spontaneity with deliberation. Presenting a design at a moment's notice is not necessarily unreasonable, but the project team must understand the potential risks to the project.

## Reluctant participation in design activities

"I'll leave the drawing to my colleagues."

Some members of the team may not actively participate in creative games and brainstorming activities. Collaborative sessions to generate lots of ideas or validate an approach are a staple of the design process. Since designing products (Web sites or otherwise) touches so many people in the organization, these sessions typically involve lots of different kinds of people. Some of them may regard these activities as soft or superfluous.

In this situation, "One bad apple can spoil the bunch." One person's reluctance may be contagious, causing other members of the team to disengage. This may turn into methodological conflict, where the rest of the team questions the approach of the designer.

The designer may not see his or her role as getting someone to love the design process, but instead as creating a great product. Solving this situation will be difficult if no one takes the responsibility to actively engage otherwise reluctant team members.

## Responses not timely

"[This quote intentionally left blank.]"

You're not receiving responses to your inquiries about feedback, next steps, required inputs, or other dependencies for forward progress. This could lead to operational issues if you fail to make progress because you aren't getting the responses you need. And it could impact your performance.

Unfortunately, patterns of unresponsiveness shift the conversation from the design itself to the communication channels. Instead of spending precious hours discussing and debating the merits of different design concepts, you are wondering about the best way to keep so-and-so involved. You're wondering how much more work you can do without his or her input. You're wondering whether you can nag such a person.

## Separated from key stakeholders

"Let me take this to the VP, and I'll let you know what she says."

Designers find themselves separated from the true client or customer through layers of bureaucracy. This separation may be an artifact of the organization or may be actively encouraged by some team members. They say knowledge is power, but they also say, "It's not what you know, it's who you know."

The "telephone effect" hampers the designer's ability to communicate ideas, solicit input, and understand feedback. Members of the team (especially those who are part of the bureaucratic layers separating the designer from the client) may perceive performance issues.

While the bureaucratic layers may be part of the corporate culture, prior conflicts between the designer and the team will make it difficult for the designer to circumvent these obstacles. By demanding to work directly with stakeholders, the designer may be seen as a "troublemaker," and bureaucratic layers will try to preserve their importance by acting as communications channels. The first step to closing the separation is building trust with the people immediately around you.

## Tasks and goals not aligned

"Everyone says we need to hold a day-long brainstorming session."

Designers sometimes engage in design activities with no real rationale. The reason amounts to "We've done it this way before," or "We've always done this." Such activities yield outcomes that likely don't move the project forward, or do so inefficiently.

If a designer is doing an activity related to the project, how can it not be productive? Assume that the design team prepares a specification document the way they've always prepared a specification document. Perhaps this is a new kind of project: building software unlike any other they've used before, or taking advantage of some new design technique. They might retreat to the familiar outcome of the specification document because the new project or technique is such a risk. But because the project is new, it has unique needs, requiring different behaviors and commitments from everyone involved. The engineering team must behave differently, the quality assurance team must behave differently, and the business stakeholders must behave differently. Relying on old methods may be the right choice, but only after the project team collectively determines that it will support their new behaviors.

A design team may have a repeatable process, but good teams recognize that every process must adapt to unique circumstances. It must have wiggle room to adjust to distinct objectives or organizations or teams. When a team follows a process rotely, without consideration for the goals, they diminish the likelihood they will meet those goals.

**Uncoordinated collaboration**

"So, which one of us is doing this?"

Some project teams have no plan, no overall direction of where they're going long-term and the activities required to get there. Other teams may understand the project's objectives, have a general sense of the activities and outputs, but have no structure for how people will work together, answering basic questions like

- How often will the team meet?
- How will the team use meeting time?
- When can the team expect to see outputs?
- How will one person's activities affect another person's?
- Will the other team members have a chance to review deliverables prior to meeting?
- What's the best way to communicate feedback?

When people don't know how they're working together, they don't know whether they should be making decisions individually or as a group. They don't know whether they need to focus on building consensus or getting buy-in. They don't know if their activities impact other people, or if they're dependent on others.

This situation may stem less from poor planning and more from an anticollaboration culture or mindset. Deep-rooted reluctance to collaborate, either in the corporate culture or in the individuals, will be difficult to change.

## Unreasonable constraints

"I want the design to look the same on every Web browser."

Designers thrive on constraints: boundaries help designers understand what constitutes a good solution for the challenge. Some projects, however, are bounded by constraints that are arbitrary. The world works in mysterious ways, and businesses sometimes have to adapt by adopting esoteric rules and policies. Perfect example: in the early days of e-commerce, customers could not return online purchases to the physical store. This made it difficult to design elegant experiences: the business saw these as two distinct units, and so had to treat the customer as if she or he was two different people.

Designing while bounded by unreasonable constraints takes the fun out of it. It exasperates designers, who can't create elegant solutions. They must devise concepts that address these arbitrary constraints while sacrificing the experience of the user.

The conflict arises when designers seek to push against these boundaries and are denied the opportunity to relax the constraints. On the flip side, they may devise a solution that works within the boundaries, but the other members of the team find the design unacceptable. The designer may be at a creative roadblock, unable to come up with something "better" while still conforming to the requirements.

One variation of this situation is "no constraints," when stakeholders believe they're doing a favor to the design team by letting them "blue sky." Conflict enters here when

- Designers attempt to establish constraints, only to find the rest of the team unable to provide anything meaningful.
- Designers present design concepts that the rest of the team reject continually, because they have no means for judging the effectiveness of the design.

## Wrong scope

"What do you mean I wasn't supposed to work on that?"

A designer works on the wrong thing. This manifests itself in different ways. Perhaps the designer misunderstood the assignment, or might have done work on the wrong part of the project. Perhaps the designer prioritized his or her tasks incorrectly. And, having just sunk lots of time into something that's potentially unusable, the designer potentially impacted budget and schedule.

This may be the most humiliating situation for designers. It's one thing to design something that doesn't work, but quite another to design the wrong thing entirely. Besides having to get the project back on track, the design team will now question the designer's ability to understand assignments. Such a situation undermines the designer's confidence. With the wrong mindset, that designer may shut down rather than embrace the challenge.