

Design Thinking in Health Care Philanthropy: Creativity and Innovation Unleashed

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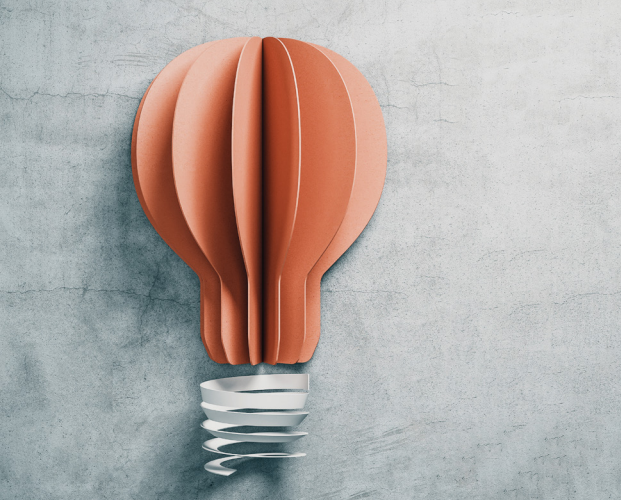


Did 2020 leave you exhausted, grasping for straws to continue your mission during the pandemic? Maybe you designed an online giving website, only to be surprised and disappointed that would-be donors were stymied or confused. Maybe your virtual meetings with donors did not go as smoothly as planned. Perhaps the unrelenting difficulties of 2020 left you yearning for new and effective engagement strategies.

How can 2021 be the year you implement innovative ways to engage board members and executive leadership in strategic planning for philanthropy, as well as get their wholehearted buy-in during implementation? Let me introduce a strategy that is getting well-deserved attention: **design thinking**.

Design thinking is a collaborative, human-centered approach to solving complex problems. To be useful, it must address real issues that humans are experiencing. It is also a way to refer collectively to a system of innovation tools and techniques with which many health care C-Suite executives are now becoming familiar, and thus, so should we.

Design thinking was originally conceived as an approach to innovation applied to developing and designing products. Producers, manufacturers, designers and product engineers have used



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this approach to work in collaboration with end users in an iterative series of creative sessions. These design sessions are specifically crafted to uncover the ways customers interact with products in real life. It then unleashes the creativity of the user and the design team to improve the user’s experience.

Harnessing the unique skills, perspectives, experiences and collective brainpower of a diverse set of participants, technical expertise takes a back seat to experiential activities. During immersive sessions that explore the user’s experience through objective observation, prototyping, “day-in-the-life” scenarios and user interviews, the designers and engineers gain empathy and insight. The purpose of this phase is to investigate and ultimately define the problem that needs to be solved.

Once the problem statement is defined, the next phase begins with participants responding to a variety of brainstorming tools and techniques designed to elicit the largest possible array of solutions, without regard to the feasibility of the suggestions. No attempt is made to eliminate far-fetched or impractical ideas, while the source of each idea is often kept anonymous to preclude bias for or against any idea based solely on its contributor.

From these proposals—the wilder the better—the group begins the third phase, evaluating and prioritizing the most appealing options, with practical considerations or business metrics such as budget, scalability, or feasibility not yet applied. During this process, the design-thinking facilitator is looking for options that evoke an end user’s reaction of surprise and delight.

Finally, in the fourth stage, practical business considerations and feasibility come into focus. Participants further narrow the range of options until they converge and agree on the final few solutions to take into practice. Occasionally, a solution that would have been declared disruptive and unreasonable in a normal business strategic planning session will emerge from this innovative process with a cadre of dedicated supporters. It is these new, innovative ideas that take progressive organizations to the next level.

It’s relatively easy to see the application of design thinking tools and techniques to the improvement of products and services, but what about its use in improving philanthropy? What are the elements of design thinking we can apply to helpful effect in health care fund development? Why should we cultivate these skills or learn how and when to use them?

As health care philanthropy professionals, we are not the service providers. We often have little, if any, interaction with the recipients of services prior to their need for care. We typically work at the interface between the nonprofit health care delivery providers and donors. We form the connection between the providers who alleviate or prevent suffering from an illness or disease



and the donors who wish to alleviate pain or improve health through monetary contributions. Design thinking can help us make these connections in ways that may never have been thought possible or feasible.

It is likely that you have participated in some version of a design thinking session without having labeled it as such. Imagine your next strategic planning meeting using tools and techniques created under the design thinking rubric to help your team shift their thinking and enter a creative, collaborative mindset. Far from the mind-numbing or intimidating brainstorming sessions of old, design thinking sessions are fast, fun and fundamentally different ways to elicit insight into a problem and quickly generate many potential approaches.

I am not promising the demise of energy-sucking meetings where no new ideas are hatched, one or two participants dominate the discussion or novel approaches are discarded too quickly—but there is a better way! And it's in design thinking!

So, when you are looking for a better way to engage board members and executive leadership in strategic philanthropy planning, wanting their wholehearted buy-in on implementation, you might consider a design thinking session. Try it during your next board retreat to activate the energy, imagination and commitment of your staunchest allies. When you evaluate, design or renew your online giving website, consider using design thinking tools to accommodate and delight real-life donors who have chosen to join your mission through their gifts. When you are working to create yet another virtual engagement event and your team is feeling “Zoom fatigue,” I challenge you to incorporate design thinking tools to refresh the planners as well as the participants.

You do not need to be a design thinking expert to recognize situations that would benefit from these tools and techniques. Philanthropy work is human centered at its very core, making design thinking the perfect method to jump start your 2021 philanthropic strategies. Working knowledge of design thinking tools should be part of your professional portfolio as you strive to achieve your health care organization's mission, especially this year.

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February 10, 2021

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