

A person in a dark suit and white shirt is holding a glowing lightbulb with both hands. Inside the lightbulb, a string of small, warm-white lights is visible, with one light at the top of the bulb and another further up the string. The background is dark and out of focus.

Reinventing Leadership

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In changing contexts, we need new models and skills for an old role.

Rarely discussed in architectural studios, leadership may seem a distant, ancient skillset, little changed in recent centuries. The average architect likely feels it has scant applicability to design. Such thinking is mistaken. Why? Because the design profession needs leadership now more than ever. And the art of leading has changed drastically from its “set a direction and command boldly from on high” days of old. How so? The pace of change since March 2020 has been bewildering. A global pandemic, an economic recession, job loss, business closures, lingering racial and social inequity, political divisiveness, and an environmental tipping point threaten life as we

know it. Old leaders and their obsolete approaches won’t do anymore. We need new models and skills.

NEW LEADERSHIP SKILLS

In support of the above hypothesis, I offer some new leadership skills to cope with a post-COVID design industry and world.

1. Know Your S-Curve

To address these new contexts, new leaders should start by learning about the S-shaped lifecycle curve of any living system: rapid growth in the organism’s early years that slows in maturity and falls off as the organism eventually dies. Those

who don't appreciate this curve will fall victim to it. S curves tell us the inexorable march of decline faces us all — whether we admit it or not. Admit it we must. In his book, *A New Reality*, Jonathan Salk illustrates the sigmoid life cycle curve that governs all living systems. Where are you on your curve?

Those who refuse to mitigate their own S-curve with Darwinian adaptation and evolution will suffer from stagnation, failure, and extinction. Why reinvention? Because as the world changes, so must we. Whether by self-induced equilibrium punctuations or externally driven chaos events, leaders must induce self-evolution by anticipating and reacting to the changes happening around them. Those who do will reap the rewards of reshaping their S curves – a benefit when changes aplenty are afoot.

2. Know What's Happening: Situational Awareness

A second critical leadership skill for our new world is situational awareness. In a world changing more radically than ever before, any

leader's duty is to continually look out, up, down, and around in multi-directional awareness to constantly reevaluate and reset direction for their organizations. More akin to the attitude of an Army Special Forces or Green Beret soldier than a designer sauntering through a design exploration, leaders bear responsibility — to themselves and those who follow them — to be aware. This need has always been present but beckons louder these days. Looking, seeing, absorbing, and filtering sensory data must now occur at a frightening pace. Now that data exceeds humans' abilities to process it in time, and some of it is intentional disinformation sent by foes to misdirect us, we need new ways cope with infoglut. Filters, teammates, and new ranking skills for admitting, absorbing and processing information are required.

3. Know Where You Are - And Where You're Going: The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle

Drawn from physics, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, rephrased and reapplied for a lay audience, states: the more you know where are, the

less you know where you're going. And conversely, the more you know where you're going, the less you know where you are. If you find yourself on a NASA spacecraft hurtling at light speed toward earth at a given trajectory, you can predict with certainty that you'll reach your destination. But because of your velocity, you have little ability to accurately know where you are at that moment.¹ And similarly, if your craft – let's say your car – is still in its parking space at the office, you know precisely where you are, but you have little certainty where you'll go. You could decide to drive home, go straight, or turn left, and all at yet to be determined rates of speed and vectors. Leaders understand these two extremes and factor them into their decision making. And to help themselves along the way, they look for buoys and guideposts in their journeys. Look for yours. Take the long perspective. Know better where you are and where you're going.

¹ My reference may not be accurate at all macro and micro scales. Hell, I'm not a physicist. But the dichotomy of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle still holds appeal, and I apply my variant in the common English sense. For design firm leaders, the question is: can an organization know both its location and its vector simultaneously?

4. Take Risks

Because of the greater uncertainty we face, another leadership skill now in high demand is accepting, taking and managing risk. For a century and a half, the profession of architecture has evolved at a glacial pace. By all admissions, and by design, design has been a gentleman's profession, intentionally distanced from commerce, risk, and speculation. In school, we weren't taught to even consider risk, much less manage it. We were taught to focus on the art and the science of design and building. A distant third category was business. With an already full curriculum, there was little to no discussion about context, strategy, leadership, or making change.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb makes several excellent points in his recent TEDx talk, entitled "Skin in the Game."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uv6KLbkvua8>

To paraphrase, he posits that any business which is judged by its peers rather than reality is doomed. As an example, take weather forecasters. They are only valuable when their

predictions are accurate, not when they agree with other networks forecasts. I'd suggest architecture be added to that mix. Our focus on design awards is narcissistic—we need reality and consequences to hold us accountable. Things like clients, users, and P&L statements help us achieve that. Only recently are a few bold design firms beginning to measure carbon footprints, energy use, building and human performance, and life cycle cost (the only meaningful cost metric).

Without further punch-pulling: architectural firms must change their relationships to metrics and risks. They should be willing to wager their own profits on real performance metrics, and clients should be skeptical of any designer unwilling to share the risk of implementation.

And maybe, just maybe, architects should also be rewarded more handsomely than with mere trophies when their performance is exceptional – as measured by the performance of the buildings they design for their clients.

Taleb calls these truths simple Darwinian survival, because systems

learn at a biological level. They change at a cellular level. By learning and changing over time, they eliminate cells with the wrong traits. As a result, the unaccountable, maladapted organisms don't survive. They die. In a final ancient counterintuitive reminder, Taleb cites Hammurabi's code. The edict "an eye for an eye" tells us: we must own our own risks. The aggregate upside for newly adapted risk embracers is a better outcome for clients, designers and communities alike.



5. Be A TrimTab: Catalyze Small Scale Change

Buckminster Fuller's tombstone epitaph reads: "Call Me TrimTab." By this he refers to the small flap seen on boat rudders, particularly large ocean liners and cruise ships, whose job it to turn, catch some water, and overcome the inertia so the larger rudder then turns the ship. His notion of the trimtab as an analogy to reflect the power of small, personal, local, and well-placed change to effect greater change is captivating. New leaders need to understand and convey the power of trimtabs to their extended teams in making precise yet minute adjustments to the overall machinery, such that minimal effort leads to maximum directional change.



6. Go "Zone": Use Rotating, Shared, Collective Leadership

I was privileged to be a part of strong band of friends growing up. We played sports together, got in trouble together, and retain strong bonds today – those of us still above the dirt. We enjoyed great success in those years and still do today. What was our secret? We had no singular leader. In sports parlance, rather than lead "one-on-one" or "man-to-man" we employed a "zone" defense. Each of us had a "zone" of expertise that rotated and flowed in response to our teammates and context.

Each of us possessed unique skills that were respected and deployed situationally to create a stronger-than-its-parts leadership team. Each of us led in different ways at different times. One of us was the smartest. Another the fastest. Yet another was politically and socially connected. He was a class officer and tennis captain and legitimized us. He was so focused on saying the "right" things, we branded him "Eddie Haskell." Another of us had great skills in deceit and chicanery. He also was the best athlete, at one point being

scouted by the New York Yankees. Another friend was the free-spirited lover of life, always willing to challenge conformity and authority in search of his next adventure on a lifelong existential, Zen journey.

In leadership times, because of our trust and group outlook, we intuitively knew which leader would step up in any given situation. Because they simply did. When one of us fumbled, that leader would step in with a pep talk: "Get yourselves up," he'd yell. "We'll pick you up on the next play." When we were in trouble, Eddie Haskell would step in to complement the teacher on her dress. Because we knew our limitations and valued group over self, we respected and relied on our diversity. We never turned to a single leader. We were a band of equals, radically different, but committed to the group. How lucky we were, and still are. Business, firms, and governments should be more like we were, because no single person can know everything they need to anymore. Those who deconstruct and expand the role will better position themselves for change. Even if you're

required to have a single leader, learn to widen that leader's impact by activating experts beyond their formal leadership team.

6. Keep Going, and Never Finish: The Zeigarnik Principle

There's an old Woody Allen adage that tells us just showing up is half the battle. Beyond showing up, the follow-on advice touches on the value of persistence. Keep going and never give up. You'll win out in the end. But I want to add a third nugget, a secret psychological principle that can help us all. It's called the Zeigarnik Principle, named for Russian psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik. In psychology, it states that an activity that has been interrupted may be more readily recalled. It postulates that people remember unfinished or interrupted tasks better than completed tasks, and that open ended, incomplete encounters heighten focus. They hold our attention and keep us on task. For example, remember Robert Ludlum's thriller beach books about Jason Bourne? As you turned the pages, Ludlum would place his hero in another precarious position, and

on the last page of each chapter leave us with a scenario such as: "Bourne saw the assassin through the window across the 10-story light court below. Poised, he leapt through the window and..." Ludlum left us to wonder what happened next. That's the Zeigarnik Principle. Intentional open-endedness. We see it in TV sitcoms, serial dramas, and other places. Even after having coffee with a friend we might end by saying: "Let's do this again." It gives us something to look forward to. As a result, we are more aware, engaged, hopeful, and positive. Creating a built-in open end keeps us focused, purposeful, intentional, and curious. More alive. In that regard, I feel sorry for friends, neighbors and colleagues who respond to the question: "How are you doing in COVID times?" "I'm bored."

The best projects and meetings are ones in which we discuss a trend, a learning or sharing opportunity, or a crisis, problem, or new initiative to be solved. We're evolving, growing, moving toward something: a common can't-fail goal. We're not being stagnant or regressing. When it



Bluma Zeigarnik – Internet Photo



comes to your life and work, my advice is simple: use the Zeigarnik Principle. Keep enough initiatives going so you always have something to do, to work on, and to look forward to. In that way, your work is never done. It keeps you young and ever changing.

7. Cycle Quickly. Change Radically.

One of the most dramatic lessons of the COVID pandemic has been how quickly large organizations have been able to reinvent themselves when forced. In our DI November virtual event, The Future of Environmental Responsibility, presenter Richard Palmer shared the remarkable story of the Australian government, who reacted overnight to fund and solve their country's homeless problem as a pandemic response by putting homeless people in vacant hotels. At home in the US, nearly every business was forced to learn how to reinvent themselves in mere days to be able to work from home. The US Congress acted relatively quickly – by partisan congress standards - to legislate and implement the PPP stimulus bill. Hundreds of pharmaceutical companies reacted at

warp speed to develop clinical trials for possible new vaccines. How were these entities all able to move so quickly? They had no choice.

In all these examples, organizations continued to operate — doing their primary functions and day jobs, in some cases more productively than before – while they bore the added pressure of reinventing themselves! This kind of speed and success at rapid change makes one ask: What the hell were they all doing before?

Yes, forced change can be a good thing. We change when we have to, but we'd rather have some advance notice. Consider this your notice: change is upon us, don't squander it. And it will come again. When it does, be ready. Fail early and often. Entrepreneurs of all different risk profiles employ thinking from the risks down. They use rapid prototyping and iterations to analyze and simulate outcomes. Michael Schrage's book *Serious Play* is a fine investigation of rapid prototyping as a simulation, iteration, and risk management tool.

WHERE DO YOU START?

Where you begin to change your leadership approach, by necessity, must be up to you, because it's unique to you. But here are a few possible points of beginning.

Embrace Change

In the COVID context, don't complain, don't wait. Embrace the sudden change. Seek new rhythms and patterns of connection, communication, and creation. Despite our early hopes, the pandemic will not be gone quickly. While we may have to retreat into a shell and self-isolate physically, don't do it emotionally. Keep active. Keep connected. And find what's next.

Leverage Technology

One possible point of beginning is technology. In many firms, technology is still tangential, not assimilated. A tool, not an integral way of life and working. Every firm should have a technology strategy and plan to prioritize and fund it on an ongoing basis.

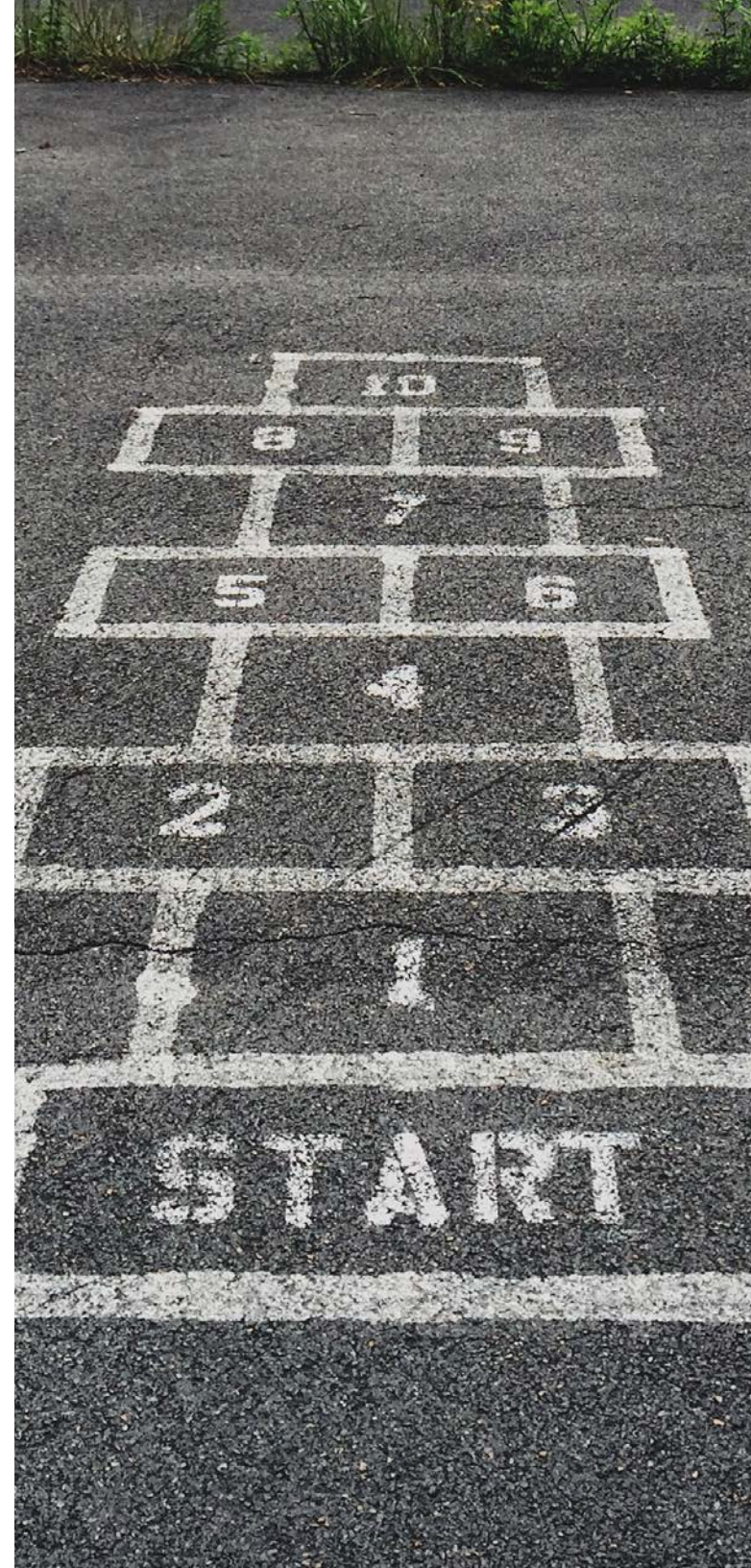
Break Boundaries

In assessing your own current location and destination in a self-audit, consider looking beyond the design business space. Look at events happening around you and affecting your organization to spark change. Blow on those embers and turn them into grassroots brushfires and blazes. When you see a fire burning in the eyes of a talented associate create a role or an initiative for them. Let them do what they love.

Start with Why: Meaning and Purpose

Having viewed the larger context, study those reasons that led you to change. Good leaders are clear on why they are doing what they do. We should all be. To be purposeful in connecting people, giving back, and showing meaning, I suggest reading Viktor Frankl's classic book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. In it, he outlines four sources of meaning:

- work or vocation
- a significant mentor
- a life changing experience or epiphany, and
- aging gracefully





“You have to die a few times before you can really live.”

Charles Bukowski

The lucky ones among us have had the benefit of finding more than one of these, or even all of them.

Expand Leadership, Collaboration, and Connection (We Need Each Other)

Deputize your teams to contribute, engage and commit. Make conscious plans and investments in connecting, being thankful in work, health, wealth, family, and friends. Create a new personal sense of sanity for how you relate. Do it for yourself and for those who need you. There's something counterintuitive in the people who comprise the design professions. Although many are introverted, when their projects are done, people who like to design buildings are dying for the chance to share it with someone. Surprise. The reality is we need each other. That's how life works. Connecting with people is work, an important aspect

of the job. We must stop relying on the denial, divide, and cancel cultures as solutions to things we disagree with. We all have biases and beliefs - and stories of struggles and difficulty. Let's reinvent our default mode to look for the wonderful chances to share, connect, and find common ground. We are privileged to get to do what we love. Let's bring collaboration back with conscious actions and strategies.

Be a Continuous Learner

Learn from the process and be a student of the game, strategizing - and leading - out loud. Avoid “one and done change” mantras.

Go Beyond the “Project Mentality” – Adopt New View Horizons

As designers and builders, most of us have an ongoing need to effect change, make progress, and get things done. We need movement and

progress from A to B. We have to be going somewhere, even if it's just staying busy doing what we love. Besides, that keeps us from having to focus on important things.

A good number of us thrive in these short-term purposes. Some call it the “project mentality.” We have to have a project. But true leadership demands a longer-term vision, or view horizon. Managers follow the vision. They adjust resources to maintain and keep that vision — their project — between the lines. Leaders, with the help of their teams, determine that vision, and are responsible for monitoring and redirecting it when required. Managers do things right. Leaders do the right things. Henry Ford knew this distinction: “there is no worse fate than doing with the utmost efficiency, that which should not be done at all.”

THE NEW LEADERS?

Just who are the new leaders I'm talking about? Not the current leaders, firm founders and principals nearing retirement. Most of them are more interested in maintaining the status quo, surviving until it's time for them to retire. It's where they are on their S-curves: they have far less need to reinvent themselves or their firms. Emerging leaders have the most to gain from reinvention. As mid-career professionals they've been around long enough to know the industry and its problems. They have suffered the inefficiencies in their firms and industry. Their processes and peers have felt the pain. They see the need for change. And they need to begin the process now — in a way that's unique to them and their firm — to have benefit. To leave their firms a legacy of continued excellence, firm founders should be actively finding the next generation of emerging leaders.

In an ironic twist, COVID may have an unintended consequence as a “boot camp” for current leaders transitioning out of their firms.

Having more time alone or working from home may have given them time for reflection. COVID has perhaps given them a preview or practice run at being empty nesters, retiring, or turning over the reins. Or maybe it's spurring them on to contemplate their next evolution in the design industry — as mentor, or experienced contributor in some new way.

The new generation of leaders is coming of age in a time where they have been shaped with new perspectives and values. Advocates of equity, diversity and inclusion, and environmental issues have different values about capitalism, racism, home ownership, and fossil fuel use. They have these new values because they grew up in a different context. They need them because they are now are faced with leading a radically different world.

REINVENTING MYSELF

In my essay last quarter entitled New Rules, I proposed suggestions for new leadership. Some might ask if I followed those rules myself. The

answer is yes. In fact, I went beyond creating new rules. I reinvented myself on countless occasions. To catalog this shapeshifting, here are a few of the roles I've had over the course of my more-than-50-year career as an “architect.” I'm way past my allotted nine lives.

As an “architect”, I've been a student, teaching assistant, research assistant, invited lecturer, adjunct instructor in architecture, drafter, carpenter, laborer, graduating to roles as project designer, project architect, and associate design director, project manager, and principal. I've been a member of the AIA, NCARB certified, LEED accredited, and elected to the AIA's College of Fellows, now Emeritus status.

After crossing the line to join a national CM firm as an industry change agent and evangelist, I founded roles, services, and departments in planning & design support services, building information modeling / virtual design & construction, and design management.

In my latest iteration as speaker/mentor/writer/editor/ and strategic advisor I've morphed into a keynote speaker, advisory board member at several universities, author of an Amazon #1 new release: Managing Design (Wiley 2019), principal at DesignIntelligence Strategic Advisors, and managing editor, DesignIntelligence Media Group.

Have you had enough? If so, try this kind of self-assessment exercise for yourself. It will energize you to the history of – and possibilities for – your own reinvention.

RESPONSIBILITY TYPES

DI's Dave Gilmore speaks to four responsibility types among the design community:

- 1 Leadership
- 2 Environmental
- 3 Relationship (interpersonal and societal)
- 4 Business and Financial (including operational, and administrative matters and profitability)

Do you have the requisite skills in all these areas? If not, you may be ripe

for reinvention. Or, as an alternative, augmentation from other resources.

BE OPEN. BE VULNERABLE: RETHINK AND REINVENT

DI's editorial theme for 2020 was a cycle of redoing things: Researching, Reframing, Redefining and Reinventing. As we end the year and look forward to a better 2021, we urge you to allow yourself to express your vulnerability in the appropriate contexts. If you're open, I can give you something — and vice versa. Give the benefit of the doubt to those you trust. Listen, and always be looking for new ideas and perspectives. Look for experiences different from your own. Practice role reversal: strategic reinvention and business insight can result. We offer this menu of options for your consideration.

We wish you good fortune in your quest for new and provocative ways to reinvent leadership.

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