



**Seeking Clarity**

DesignIntelligence®  
Quarterly



## Seeking Clarity

*HKS' Director of Organizational Development, Stevi McCoy, discusses control, emotional intelligence, acedia, punctuated equilibrium, segmenting, the human spirit, and hope*

### STEVI MCCOY

Director of Organizational Development, HKS

**DesignIntelligence - Michael LeFevre (DI):** Your role as director of organizational development at HKS seems crucial in coping with the issues we're facing. Did your training prepare you for what you're facing?

**Stevi McCoy (SM):** Honestly, I'm not sure any training could have prepared anyone for what happened this year! But my background in change management and communications was helpful in understanding what needed to happen and when.

With all the uncertainty COVID brought, I think it was the sudden lack of control that impacted people the most. Nobody knew what was coming next. It was a situation we'd never seen before, and we weren't sure how to navigate it.

Every day our teams wrestled with this duality of business-as-usual on one hand, and almost paralyzing doubt on the other. In times like these, you take it one day at a time, identify what we know, and admit what we really don't know.

There is great truth in F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous statement, "The true test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."

**DI:** I've always loved that quote.

**SM:** I do too because it's quintessentially human — this ability to live between two opposing forces and keep moving forward.

On one hand, we didn't know what the virus was doing, or how the pandemic would affect our ability to deliver. On the other, we did know what our clients expected of us – what they needed. We did know our strategic plan. But to be able to navigate these truths at the same time and still function? That was initially our biggest challenge. We had to partition what we didn't know, double down on what we did, and keep our eye on the work in front of us.

**DI:** That's a great observation — accepting the loss of control and scaling back what we know and what we can predict. We're so used to thinking, "I'm going to go to work tomorrow. There's going to be a football game on Saturday. I've planned for it a year in advance." But now, there's not.

**SM:** That's right, we were stripped bare of everything we thought we knew. Not only did we not know what we were dealing with, there was an added layer of misinformation. We had to sift through what was real and what wasn't, and that complexity made it difficult for our leaders to lead. It was a scarcity of knowledge in a sea of data.

**DI:** I'm not a psychologist, but I think the ability to "hold two opposing ideas in the mind at the same time and still function" relies on the executive function of the brain. Outside the brain, you have multiple executive functions, a daunting litany of things you're responsible for: organizational development, human potential, growing talent, leadership development, change management, and internal communications strategies... What background armed you for this range of domains?



**SM:** My degree is in organizational psychology, which essentially explores the human behavior element of business.

It's understanding people and equipping them to be the very best they can be. A business strategy is only words on paper unless competent, efficient, and engaged individuals make it happen. Most of what I do boils down to understanding where we need to go as a firm, and ensuring our people and teams have the skills and information they need to get there.

**DI: Most people I know in the design business didn't go there because they had good people skills. They were introverted. They liked to design and draw buildings. As someone who does have people skills, what attracted you to applying them within a design firm?**

**SM:** Relationships and opportunity. Knowing the CEO, Dan Noble, and the need the firm had at the time. Like most things in life, it was serendipitous — the opportunity came about, and I was excited to jump on board. Even though people are people, every industry — every company, really — is distinct. The design industry is no exception. It has its own unique DNA. At HKS, for example, there is an exciting creative energy. This sense of infinite possibility immediately intrigued me. But although the design industry is unique from others, the baseline needs of people and how we interact with each other — that's a constant across any team in any business.

**DI: Your firm recently had a major restructuring and reinvention. Your position was created as an outcome of**

**that. Has your mission changed as a result of COVID and the other concurrent crises?**

**SM:** No, we didn't change course, as much as double down on certain aspects. The strategic plan we executed two years ago had been in development for a while. One of its hallmarks was clarity. Clarity of communication, clarity of roles and responsibilities. Applying a level of clarity gave us significant traction in our strategy.

Even in the face of COVID, we continued to ask ourselves, "What am I uniquely poised and equipped to provide to the firm? What is our vision, the clarity of execution, how are we going to get it done, and how are we going to organize ourselves to make it happen?" I would say COVID just increased the urgency of our mission.

**DI: Your answer is well timed, because after a bewildering, befuddling year, clarity is our editorial theme for 2021. Can you share some of the challenges? Working from home, managing personal lives? Have you found clarity?**

**SM:** We've compared this year to an evolutionary concept called punctuated equilibrium.

**DI: Another of my favorite ideas.**

**SM:** It's one of mine too. It's a biological theory that says along a relatively static period there are moments of extreme environmental disruption that make it impossible to continue in stasis. We've experienced just that.

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Not more than a month into the pandemic, we knew that some aspects of our pre-COVID life would never be the same. We would be forced to evolve.

In March, when COVID first impacted our firm, 1,400 people across our 24 offices literally went remote overnight. It was astounding.

We were shocked at how fast we could make it happen. It was a testament to our teams, especially our IT group, for making it so seamless. But this was just the first step in our adaptation.

Equipment and connectivity, fine: we got those. Our next biggest challenge surfaced working parents. Because not only

did we go home, so did the kids. We have a fair number of working parents at our firm who, overnight, were not only working from home, away from their teams, but were also suddenly expected to be homeschool teachers. Parents were tag-teaming trying to simultaneously teach, parent, and work.

How can we support these parents? I told one person, “I wish I could somehow babysit everybody’s kids for them during the day.” And the disruption rippled beyond our working parents. Even if you didn’t have children at home, it was a good bet someone on your team did. In the beginning we tried to have fun with it. How can we virtually help keep the kids entertained once virtual learning was done for the day? We created children’s content.

We talked about schedule flexibility. Before, when people were working remotely, they felt like they had to always be online. So, we looked at flex scheduling.

Early in the crisis, we realized this wasn't a temporary disruption, it was irrevocable change. But rather than think of it as a loss, we turned it into opportunity. Through regular surveys, we learned about this new way of working and identified what we needed to be successful in this new environment.

We created a flexible work policy that will outlive the pandemic and become our new way we work. We've been able to take the good things we've learned and evolve in ways we never dreamed of.

Now that we're nearly a year in, our biggest challenge will be combating burnout. The reality is, we're no longer working where we live — we're living where we work. That's a big difference. We've been in this continuous "crisis" mode for ten months. It's not sustainable. Although many things are beyond our control, a big part of our focus in the coming months will be helping our people find a more measured pace — even amidst the chaos.

**DI:** So many mid-course adjustments and reactions on your part at the individual level. Did any of them necessitate change at a structural level? For example, did you ever consider saying, "Okay, Jane, you're a fantastic landscape architect, but we have a new need. We're going to open up a daycare division and we're going to pay you a great salary to run it"? Did you consider anything like that?



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**SM:** The daycare thing's a good idea, Michael. I'll have to take that into consideration. Structurally, one of the big hurdles we've faced is working in an environment that is physically removed from everyone — clients, colleagues, team members.

This change pulled back the curtain and allowed us to see things we might have taken for granted.

We realized the physical, in-the-office environment might have created blind spots for us as far as productivity and equity were concerned.

When the visual connection — that casual, organic chatting with people, passing-by-someone’s-desk information sharing — was gone, structurally, we lost something. Not just the information sharing, but things like quality control, timely, effective feedback, mentoring, and client nurturing. Suddenly, these things had a spotlight on them, because we weren’t able to say, “Oh yeah, they’re productive, I see them working” or “Oh yeah, they’re working right next to us, we’re mentoring.”

Maybe we weren’t. Maybe we weren’t managing our clients in the most effective way. Maybe our quality control wasn’t as systemic or effective as it could be. Maybe we weren’t giving feedback in a way that grew our people. We thought we were, but, stripped of that physical contact, a lot of things came to light. We had to deconstruct something we thought we knew well and build it back up in a purely digital space.

**DI:** Good word, deconstruct. I’ve had to adopt that strategy in the past. In looking for the next department manager there wasn’t a single ideal person with all the necessary qualities and skills. To solve the problem you analyze the need, break it down, and build it back up from constituent parts, not necessarily all from the same person. After deconstructing, you build a team, a hybrid or matrix solution.

**SM:** By deconstructing the problem, you see the pieces in a

way you hadn’t before. You asked about structural changes. We were forced to rethink our communication channels. Not just pushing out communication, but just as importantly, bringing it back. Since the organic back-and-forth was gone, the big question became, “How are we making sure that our people are equipped with the information and knowledge they need?”

Starting in March, we implemented biweekly surveys, hosted regular “listening conversations with leaders,” introduced anonymous feedback channels, and provided education to our leaders on things like “asking powerful questions” and “empathetic listening.” We amassed an incredible amount of data and knowledge about our teams’ physical, mental, and environmental well-being. What we learned helped us develop additional training on leading hybrid teams, digital collaboration, and conflict resolution. This summer, when the questions of diversity, equity, and inclusion came to the fore, we focused on how to equip our leaders with the facilitation skills to handle these tough issues.

**DI:** We’ve talked about the individuals and leadership in the firm. As a “people” professional, there must be huge pressure on you now. I’ve always respected people who do what you do for a living because I didn’t want to deal with personal trauma and psychological issues. That’s why I chose to draw bricks and deal with inanimate objects. How are you holding up? Any tips to share?

**SM:** Self-care is important in times like these. Like everybody, I take it one day at a time.

That's challenging, because I'm a future-focused person at heart. But when you lose a reliable pattern to imagine the future, you're forced to take things a day at a time. You live in the present because that's all you have.

Before COVID I was never an overly scheduled person. That flexibility served me well until now. But with all the uncertainty, I've adopted stricter guide rails. I don't just slip into work. I have a start time for the day. Depending on when meetings end, I try to have a specific log-off time. It's important to have that kind of schedule predictability in your day, so I can have dinner and spend time with my family. I might log on later in the evening, but I need to put a firm stake in the ground and say, "This is my life time," because, if you don't clarify the lines, everything gets

blurred. You're neither working nor living as well as you can.

Also, simple human connection is good for the soul. Just reaching out and allowing yourself to be real and vulnerable with others is a powerful antidote to the isolation we're all feeling. A few months ago, I stumbled across the word *acedia*. It's an ancient term defined as a general feeling of angst, unrest or ennui. It's an uncomfortable impatience that seems like depression, but it's not. A lack of fulfillment, a wandering of the heart, an inertia you can't shake. When I discovered the word, I thought, "That's it! That's what I'm feeling." It was oddly therapeutic to find a defined "diagnosis" for what I was experiencing. When you can define exactly what you're feeling and say, "This is what I'm going through."





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Are you going through this too?" it gives you a sense of comfort and connection. Being able to describe what's going on in your heart and head and share it with people around you, whether via Zoom or with your family, is curative.

**DI:** Are you talking about defining feelings or defining a work product since we don't know where we're going long term?

**SM:** Both. This situation — the last ten months — has not

only made it okay to talk about feelings, it's almost made it impossible not to. Without the barrier of a physical office, we are bringing our true selves to the table, glimpsing kids and spouses in the background of Zoom, seeing each other in sweatshirts and ball caps. I think being authentic and vulnerable with each other has helped us get through this shared crisis. It helps us work better. But getting real can be disarming and uncomfortable for some people.

I worked with many leaders this year who were in a zone they had never experienced before. Not just COVID-related stuff, but also the vulnerability we've been asked to experience, admit, and share. The racial tensions that happened this summer only added to it. It's okay to feel depressed. It's okay to feel fear. It's okay, as a leader, to not know all the answers. But we have to realize that although we're all in the same storm, we're not in the same boat, so it is critical that we ask questions to understand where the other person is. That is something they don't necessarily teach you in business or design school.

Those are things that aren't typically brought into work, but the cataclysmic shifts in the way we work have demanded it. I think this is a change that will last long after the pandemic crisis is over.

**DI:** Let's look backward. You've been in your role a while. I've been in this business for five decades. We were taught in school to practice as lone geniuses. We've convinced ourselves we are creative, collaborative people, but were never taught how to collaborate. Have you seen that with your staff, and if so, how do we fix it?

**SM:** The problem with the lone-wolf approach is that it leaves so much potential on the table. I know that approach is taught in school, and people really dig into it. Maybe the thought is when you're in school, there's a certain amount of self-actualization that needs to happen, digging deep within yourself, changing the way you think. These are valuable processes that aren't necessarily collaborative in nature.

Collaboration is critical, though. Because as we go forward, the complexity required for integrated design solutions cannot be achieved through one person's skillset, experience, world view, or expertise. As individuals, we bring a dynamic, unique perspective, which is wonderful. But the best solutions come from true collaboration and a mosaic of diversity.

It's easy to say diversity yields better solutions and we need everybody's vantage. Yes, we do need everybody's expertise and unique skillset at the table. But that type of higher-level collaboration isn't always easy. To do it well takes empathy, patience, self-awareness, humility, and deft communication. I cannot stress that enough.

And you can teach those things in school. As technology and AI become more sophisticated, they will increasingly commoditize a lot of the work we do. That leaves emotional intelligence as our key differentiator. Patience, self-awareness, humility — all those elements fall under the umbrella of emotional intelligence. At the core that's what makes us human.

If we can cultivate humanity that cannot be replicated by technology and develop those skills early in school — not just as a nice-to-have but as an imperative, as a requirement for how we approach design — that will make us better designers.

**DI: A fine aspiration. It remains a mystery to me. Maybe it's the artistic heritage and education, but why are designers still continuously ascending on their self-actualization scale, when in most other businesses and industries students find out who they are in school, get out, and quickly become a managers and leaders? That's comes much later and is harder to develop in designers. I'm glad to hear you acknowledging it, and I think the schools are beginning to make that shift.**

**SM:** I think so too. The shift from self-actualization to a more outward, client and team-focused posture isn't just picking up speed in schools, it's also quickly moving into practice. To truly collaborative design that involves all stakeholders – from the design team and clients to communities, and even the environment.

**DI: I just made a connection to what you talked about earlier. Driven by COVID, we've had to learn the willingness or vulnerability to say, "I don't need to control this issue, this design, whatever. I can ask my staff or my client for help. And that's okay. It's not about me." What are you worried about? What are you hopeful about?**

**SM:** The thing that concerns me, even beyond the immediate health and economic threats, is that the way of life we've

been forced to adopt because of the pandemic will become entrenched.

**DI: Do you mean due to COVID and political divisiveness?**

**SM:** All of it, really — and our behaviors in response. For the past ten months, we've been sheltering in place, isolating ourselves, engaging with others on the same screen we use to enjoy Netflix.

In addition to the devastating human loss, we've also lost a fundamental piece of our community — the places we gather in, fellowship, physical togetherness. Although we miss it (probably more than we realize), I fear we will adapt to our new normal so much, we'll gradually stop missing it at all. What concerns me is we'll become complacent and feel like we can get along without tight-knit community, without people, and our behaviors will gel in a way that isn't good for the health of our society. Science says that it takes an average of two months to form a habit. We've been at this for much longer – and when the vaccine starts to demonstrably diminish infection rates, I hope our reclusive habits diminish too.

But that's where I'm hopeful. It's encouraging to see the design innovation springing up out of this moment – not just at HKS, but in the industry overall. When I reflect on the last year, I'm encouraged by the resilience of the human spirit. Resilience became the word of the year. It's the ability to bounce back regardless of what comes at you. To bounce back stronger than you were before. Even in the most divisive and uncertain times, humans persevere.

My faith gives me this hope. Hope that no matter how bad or hopeless things seem, things will work out.

It's funny, going back to the F. Scott Fitzgerald quote, when he talks about the ability to hold two opposing ideas in tension, he goes on to say how it's possible to, "see things that are hopeless yet be determined to make them otherwise."

**DI: Maybe when we get back to being able to control things, we can make it a point to rebuild your concern. If we are resilient, there will be a pent-up demand for community. Movie theaters and cruise ships will be full again.**

**SM:** I hope so. I can't wait to travel again! I suspect when we get back a sense of normalcy and predictability, when that fear goes away, we can once again focus on other things, like rebuilding our community. Design can have such an incredible impact on imagining what this "rebuild" will look like. That's hopeful. The innovation that came and will continue to come out of this moment. The ways we've been stretched and the dormant muscles we've learned to flex. That's exciting.

**DI: Hope, community, innovation, and flexing muscles... great thoughts to end on.**

*Stevi McCoy is Director of Organizational Development at HKS, an interdisciplinary global design firm with 24 offices worldwide. She brings over 20 years' experience in strategic communications, people engagement, and business optimization.*

*With a singular focus on growing talent and maximizing human potential, Stevi's core areas of expertise are leadership development, change enablement, and culture transformation. She has designed and implemented organizational effectiveness programs for firms large and small across multiple industries including Hospitality, Healthcare, Architecture & Construction, Financial Services, and Sports & Entertainment.*