



By Daniel W. Rasmus

How to Design Conflict Out of Your Organization

My book, *Management by Design*, offers readers a methodology that creates purposeful engagement in the design of work experiences. Too often, we just let work happen to us, as managers and employees. In the daily rush to accomplish and fulfill, to satisfy and delight, we rarely take the time to consider why we do the things we do in the way we do them.

A lack of context can be frustrating, and it can lead to conflicts. Using design thinking, organizations can get out ahead of some of the conflicts the workforce, and the larger organization, may face. Design helps identify issues, eliminate barriers, and foster inclusion.

The post will work through the *Management by Design* methodology and see how it can organizations avoid conflict through design.

Balance

The methodology begins with balance, seeking those key elements that set up the dichotomy in the work experience.

The following table offers a list of typical areas where conflict can arise when behavior, assignment or circumstance fail to recognize first, that these elements are important to workers. And second, once recognized, that balance is something that must be actively pursued. Balance doesn't just happen, it must be designed into the experience.

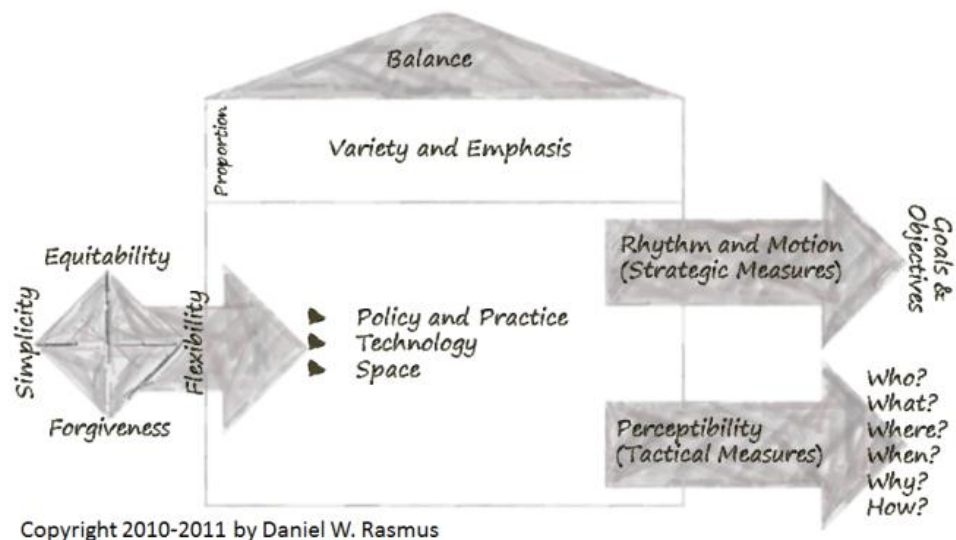


Figure 1. The *Management by Design* methodology

Table 1. Work Experience Elements That Require Balance

Individual interests	Work assignments
Technology skills required	Technology aptitude
Work condition expectations	Actual working conditions
Management approach	Need for autonomy and self-direction
Accomplishment	Being (or looking) busy
Long term measures of success	Short term measures of success
Desired approach to work	Tools available to produce results
Number of tools available in the software arsenal	Time required to learn the tools and the choice required to select a work approach for each task
Co-creation and collaboration	Management direction
Goals and objectives	Hidden agendas
Managed change	Surprises
Fulfilled agreements	Broken promises
Transparent, open and honest dialog	Closed doors, side conversations and gossip,
Work-Life balance policy	Management expectations for work
Assumed time to complete a task	Actual time to complete a task
Interruption (positive or negative)	Need to stay on task and finish
Alignment of work with strategy	Disconnection of work with strategy
Articulate job responsibilities	Actual or implied job responsibilities
Ability to learn and grow	Perception of people locked into roles
Inclusion and acceptance	Bullying and harassment
Organization's professed values	Organization's behavior

Note: this list is not intended to be exhaustive. What would you add?

The areas above are not intrinsically out of balance. Rarely, however, do organizations, or managers, sit down and systematically think about what is out of balance ahead of a conflict, and when a conflict occurs, they often treat that symptom in isolation rather than developing a larger perspective. By listing the areas that require balance, staff and management can proactively watch for out of balance situations and seek remedies before they become conflicts.

Proportion

Once managers and workers identify the items that require balance, they need to constantly consider how to portion out the items. To help with this, the methodology suggests looking at variety and emphasis. Emphasis helps keep important core work at the center while variety attempts to introduce novelty so that people have time to reflect and create. Good managers

communicate emphasis and permit, or even facilitate variety.

If managers don't introduce variety in the right way, they can create conflict. If people don't understand the permission of variety and a manager's desire to help make work interesting, they may perceive variety as randomness or disruption. If however, the manager works with his or her staff to create a balance list, and the staff agrees to what is important, then they can openly discuss how to introduce novelty as a creative act rather than a disruptive one.

The important items then become the things to emphasize. Everyone agrees that these items take priority and any movement away from these priorities must be negotiated. That does not mean that variety becomes lost in single mindedness, but that variety becomes a planned activity.

To better understand proportion, consider a product planner for a software company wants to learn more about marketing. Rather than just randomly suggest that he or she find a mentor, or “carve out some time to explore,” the worker and the manager work together to design a learning experience that adds variety to the product planner’s work. They create a curriculum that links the planner’s knowledge to the marketing discipline and spells out, very clearly, the conditions under which the planner can engage in learning. Once negotiations conclude, managers need to rigorously protect *learning time* as much as they do *execution time*.

Rhythm and Motion

There are two communication attributes to the *Management by Design* methodology, one tactical, and one strategic. The strategic attribute, called *Rhythm and Motion*, suggests that organizations clearly link work experiences to organizational strategy. Everything that people do needs to be tied to the strategy of the organization. Conflict often arises when there is a discontinuity between what an organization states as its direction, and the tasks an individual performs. When those tasks look to be outside of the strategic context, people can feel disconnected, at risk and undervalued. Those feelings can lead to conflict.

In order to avoid the perception of disconnection, organizations need to link work to strategy, and be willing to discontinue activities that don’t align with the strategy. The action of ceasing any work can itself cause conflict, but if the disconnected work is replaced by more meaningful and connected work, the loss associated with no longer doing something familiar or routine can be ameliorated.

Perceptibility

The tactical approach to communication comes in what the methodology describes as *perceptibility*.

Perceptibility works to make sure that the horizontal, or peer-to-peer, view of someone’s work is recognized, and integrated.

Conflict often arises because of miscommunication between teams and individuals. Many teams, groups and communities within organizations fail to create open channels so they can share what they are working on, their purpose, the membership of the group, and what they know. More importantly, they fail to create peer-praise opportunities. Although Ken Blanchard taught us decades ago to catch people doing something right, that instruction arrived more as advice than part of a design. It may be more important in the world of networked organizations for a co-worker to catch someone doing something right, rather than a manager.

By applying the idea of perceptibility to the work experience, people can see the horizontal linkages between their work and that of their peers. This can help eliminate conflict by recognizing redundant work early, creating space for negotiating roles and responsibilities, and identify value-added collaborations. Rhythm and motion, along with perceptibility, attempt to eliminate one of the biggest sources of conflict: the lack of information.

Tools

Policy and practice, space and technology, represent the toolkit from which we construct work experiences. The *Management by Design* methodology puts forward the proposition that culture is a reflection of behavior: behavior guided by policy and behavior in practice that essentially, over time, becomes undocumented policy. Poor design of policy, practice, space or technology, can all lead to conflict. The methodology suggests that each instance of a tool be examined through the lenses of flexibility, simplicity, equitability and forgiveness in order to engage with them in an active, rather than passive way.

As an example, a recent research project examined the value of a collaboration architecture to organizations. A collaboration architecture forms the blueprint for the tools and practices used to help people work together. In most organizations, people are not asked to work with unfamiliar tools, they often discover that multiple approaches exist for accomplishing a task such as sharing a document.

Conflict can arise if a person is on one team, attempting to master a collaboration approach, is confronted with technological dissonance when her or she needs to interface with another team that has chosen a different approach.

Conflict in this situation stems first from the initial struggle to assert one seemingly functional approach over another. Second, that frustration becomes exacerbated because the loser of the conceptual battle never really reconciles with the winning approach. Third, the person proposing the other approach starts to feel that their mastery and the work they have accomplished to date is less meaningful because it isn't the "standard" approach for the organization.

In fact, there is no standard approach for the organization. In this example, a hodgepodge of tools was adopted over time and each team was given free rein to choose from the smorgasbord of technology in the organization's collection.

The language used in this example suggests conflict by design, not management by design. What really took place was a case of work just happening to the parties involved. No one went out of their way to impose or oppose solutions, because a well-designed, rationalized architecture didn't limit the number of tools available for the same task. When the projects intersected, it was left to the workers to negotiate for a shared approach. No one thought about reconciling the approach to work at the level of detail of software tools. As *Management by Design* asserts in its premise: the work experience just happened.

At the team level, tool choice appears to be rational. Look at the collection of options and pick the one that works best and requires the least amount of time to learn (or leverages the best of existing experience and skill). Those more situational based selection processes leave out the large issue of how people work together across teams. Every workflow element, from where content is stored, to how it is edited, to how it is approved for publication, creates potential points of conflict as system conflicts evolve into human conflicts.

Here is how the *Management by Design* tool lenses would have helped reduce conflict:

- **Flexibility** Which of the tools being purposed would have offered the widest range of uses? Rather than looking just at the shared task, look at past work as well as anticipated work, and determine the tool will remain flexible.
- **Simplicity** Which tools accomplished the work with the least number of steps, and are most easily understood by the wide range of users?
- **Equitability** Which tools appeal to the widest range of users? Are their features that would keep any group not already associated with the work from effectively using the tools in the future? Are language, cultural or other assumptions made by the tools that limit their use or appeal to some groups? Is there anything offensive in how the tools approach their tasks, such as identifying requirements or presumed tasks that might not be universal executable?
- **Forgiveness** If someone makes a mistake in the use of the tool, does it allow them to gracefully recover from that mistake?

These lenses help drive toward a rational decision and away from instinctual protection of turf, both physical and conceptual.

Of course, the methodology implies tools to be evaluated. Managers need to be cognizant that resources, like the right tool or the necessary amount of time, may cause conflict at a more primary level than a situation where too many tools exist.

At the work experience level, technology reviews would be joined by policy and practice examinations, as well as assessments of space to understand how behavior, management expectations and work conditions might lead to conflict. The idea is to evaluate all of the parameters and create a work experience design that best serves the needs of the people involved, and openly and transparently identifies the issues where conflict might still exist, so that those areas can be acknowledged and proactively monitored. In design, if you don't put a name on an issue, those issues become hidden assumptions, or

hidden assertions. Without a name, people can't relate or converse about an idea or a thing.

Designing Your Way Out of Conflict

Regardless of the existence of a methodology or not, conflict often starts with an unwillingness to recognize reality, or to work through the implications of the various perceptions of reality that exist. Using the *Management by Design* approach, organizations can help make all of these issues front-of-mind for managers. All of the issues and design elements will be named, have their relationships identified and their attributes assessed. Then, and only then, can rational design begin. The final step requires peer pressure to kick-in so that awareness can become practice.



Discover more about Management by Design by visiting <http://danielwrasmus.com/management-by-design/>

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About the Author

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Daniel W. Rasmus, the author of *Listening to the Future*, is a strategist and industry analyst who helps clients put their future in context. Rasmus uses scenarios to analyze trends in society, technology, economics, the environment, and politics in order to discover implications used to develop and refine products, services and experiences. His latest book, *Management by Design*, creates an innovative new methodology for designing work experiences.

Prior to starting his own consulting practice, Rasmus was the Director of Business Insights at Microsoft Corporation, where he helped the company envision how people will work in the future. Rasmus coordinated the Microsoft® Office Information Worker Board of the Future, an advisory panel composed of college-aged students who shared ideas on how to better serve the Millennial Generation as they join the workforce. Rasmus also managed the Center for Information Work, an immersive experience that helped Microsoft's customers experience the future of work first hand.

In 2005, Rasmus created the concept of the New World of Work which has helped transform how businesses see the workplace, today and tomorrow. The New World of Work was adopted by a number of Microsoft's European subsidiaries as a way to redefine their relationship with employees, their customers and their markets. He documents these ideas in *Listening to the Future*.

Rasmus is involved in a number of industry and public sector events, including The National Association of Workforce Boards, the National Educator's Workshop, and The Front End of Innovation. He was recognized as a Distinguished Speaker by the Microsoft Executive Briefing Center.

Before joining Microsoft in October 2003, Rasmus was an analyst with the Giga Information Group, and later Forrester Research Inc. His achievements include inventing conceptual frameworks for next generation collaboration, adaptive workspaces and intelligent content services. Rasmus also served as Giga's Chief Knowledge Officer, managing internal learning within research, sales and marketing.

As a technology writer, Rasmus has authored over 220 trade journal articles and four books, including *Listening to the Future*, and *Management by Design*. Rasmus blogs regularly about the future at *Fast Company*, and on his own blog, *Your Future in Context*. His education related work can be found at *Learning Reimagined*. Rasmus worked on the staff of *PC AI Magazine* and *Manufacturing Systems Magazine*, and has been a columnist for several other publications. His comments have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Financial Times*, *The Times of London*, *CIO*, *USA Today*, *Bloomberg*, *CNN*, *ComputerWorld*, *Information Week*, *Network World*, *Fast Company*, *InternetWeek*, *InfoWorld*, *The Boston Globe*, *The San Francisco Examiner*, *Investor's Business Daily*, *Le Monde* and *Jornal Gazeta Mercantil*. Rasmus is also a published poet.

Rasmus attended the University of California at Santa Cruz and received a certificate in intelligent systems engineering from the University of California at Irvine. He is the former Visiting Liberal Arts Fellow at Bellevue College in Bellevue, WA where he continues to teach.

Rasmus lives in Sammamish, Washington with his wife Janet, his daughters Rachel and Alyssa—and their dog Indiana Jones.

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