

# Design Thinker Profile: Capabilities for Overcoming Barriers to Change

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## Abstract



**Dr. Dani Chesson** combines design capabilities with change methodologies to help organizations lead transformational change. A consultant in the financial services industry, Dani has worked with top-tier international banks and Fortune 50 companies around the globe. She is also an Affiliate Faculty Member at the Graduate School of Leadership and Change at Antioch University and an Adjunct Faculty Member at the University of Denver. Dani holds a Bachelor of Arts in Visual Communication from the State University of New York, an MBA and a Master of Science in Organization Development from Queens University of Charlotte. In 2017, Dani earned her PhD in Leadership and Organizational Change from Antioch University.

Even with all we know about change, organizations continue to struggle with driving the changes needed to meet today's evolving market needs. Failing to establish a compelling reason for change, lack of buy-in, and fear of the unknown are among the commonly cited barriers for change (Kotter, 2011; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Pardo del Val & Fuentes, 2003). In today's competitive landscape, failing at change is not a viable option. In fact, organizational successes in current times require nimbleness and agility to meet evolving and emerging market needs. Organizations such as Blockbuster and Kodak serve as the cautionary tale for what becomes of companies that fail to keep up with the times. This article explores why change is critical to organizational success, the common barriers that hold organizations back, and how Design Thinker capabilities can shift the mindset around change to create organizations that thrive in driving change.

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## **The Ever-Increasing Importance of Change**

Change is not a new challenge for organizations; however, for 21st century organizations, the pace and intensity of change has increased due to three things happening in the marketplace: savvy consumers who self-source information, commoditization of features, and globalization (Stickdorn et al., 2018; Worley et al., 2014).

First, consumers today do not rely on information directly from companies to make purchasing decisions. Enabled by social media and online reviews, consumers today source their own information about products and services. This means that many purchasing decisions today are influenced by the experiences of other customers. It is only when options are narrowed down that a customer will approach a company directly. By this point much of the purchasing decision has already been made. This shift in consumer behavior has increased the importance of customer experience—a customer is unlikely to recommend a product or service they are frustrated with. Customers today have a platform with large reach to share their frustrations—social media.

When one customer shares their experience, it alerts an entire network of people of the products, services, and companies to avoid and which to consider using (“ReviewTrackers Online Survey,” 2018). Customers are more likely to believe the word of fellow consumers and people they know personally than sales promotions and advertising campaigns from companies. (Thomas, 2018).

Second, commoditization of technology—gone are the days when free internet was considered to be a feature that distinguished a desirable hotel from one that was not. No longer is a website with a chatbot a distinguishing factor. Today, features like these and countless others are the expected standard. Once one company introduces a technology, consumers today expect that feature to be ubiquitous. For example, consider the technological advancement of contactless payments. First introduced by Barclays in 2007, it was slow to catch on but once consumers caught on to how much easier this new technology made the checkout process at stores, it became the standard consumers expected from every card in their wallet.

Financial institutions that didn’t want to lose out had to quickly adapt and when they did, customers didn’t see this as an exciting new feature, but simply as meeting the new standard.

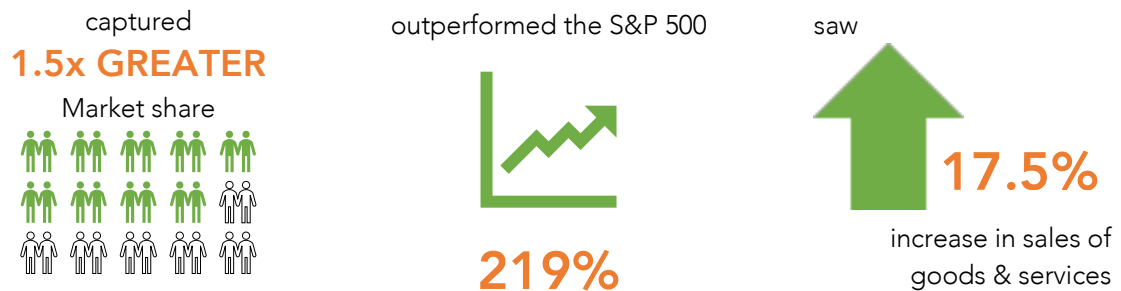
Third, globalization, has virtually eliminated physical geography as a barrier to entry. Today, consumers shop on the global stage and while there is a move to buy locally and support local businesses, when those local businesses fail to meet customer needs, customers don’t hesitate to go to go online to find what they need. Globalization doesn’t just benefit consumers; it also levels the playing field for new entrants. Today, anyone can set up shop and have access to customers around the globe. In fact, many startups today begin with the mindset of doing business internationally (Campbell, 2019). And this trend isn’t limited to digital companies (Lunn, 2011). Consider for example, Aleph Beauty a company that manufactures ethically made make up that is sustainable, cruelty free, and good for your skin. Founded in 2018, based in New Zealand, Aleph is already shipping its products internationally.

## **Today’s Competitive Landscape**

So, how can organizations compete in a marketplace where customers source their own information, and in which geography and technology are no longer a competitive advantage? Competitiveness in these market conditions require nimble organizations that can change quickly. However, change for the sake of change accomplishes nothing. Organizations today must have the ability to understand the emerging and unmet needs of their customers and adapt quickly to meet those needs. To meet customer needs, organizations must understand their customers beyond the surface level. We must dig deeper to understand customers holistically to uncover their pain points as well as what delights them (Stickdorn et al., 2018; Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011; Brown, 2008).

For 21st century organizations, what defines success is a deep understanding of customer needs and the nimbleness to pivot quickly to meet those needs. Design Thinking provides a way for organizations to overcome the common barriers to change, to become nimble, and better understand the needs of their customers. Companies that have

Figure 1. The ROI of Design Thinking



embraced the Design Thinking way of working have outperformed the S&P 500 by 219%, capture 1.5 greater market share, and increase sales by up to 17.5%—see Figure 1 (Sheppard et al., 2017; Rae, 2013).

Forward thinking organizations have used Design Thinking to drive organizational change. For example, the National Health Service of the United Kingdom used this approach to improve patient care (Bevan et al., 2007). As another example, the Australian Taxation Office used this approach to change their process to be easy to navigate for taxpayers (Body, 2008). Kaiser Permanente has used this approach to change the level of care they deliver to their network (McCreary, 2010). In taking a Design Thinking approach, teams in the studies mentioned above reported experiencing a mindset shift in how they see change. These teams now view change as a central function needed to provide the best service for their stakeholders and understand the importance of change to organizational success. Teams that have made this mindset shift embrace and even champion change; they no longer see it as something that is forced upon them, but as something with purpose and something they can play a part in creating.

### From Design Thinking to Design Thinkers

While much has been written on Design Thinking as a process methodology and the characteristics of Design Thinkers, the question still remains: how do we build deep capabilities that enable Design Thinking (Brown, 2015; Martin, 2009; Boland & Collopy, 2004; Buchanan, 1992)? Design Thinking was initially introduced to organizations as a methodology because such an

introduction made the approach more palatable to organizations that use structured processes to solve problems. While Design Thinking is a methodology, it is very limiting to see it only as a method to be used or a process to be followed. With the wider adoption of Design Thinking across industries and organizations, the time has now come to shift the focus from *doing* Design Thinking to *being* Design Thinkers. To fully realize the benefits of Design Thinking, we must go beyond the surface level of applying the methodology and dig deeper to build, embed, and master the capabilities that enable this way of working (Brown, 2015).

The work of building, embedding, and mastering capabilities requires understanding an organization's current level of capabilities. The Design Thinker Profile (Chesson, 2017) is a validated assessment that helps organizations understand the Design Thinking capabilities of their teams. The Design Thinker Profile was developed in a 2017 study involving over 500 participants across more than 20 industries to understand the core capabilities of Design Thinkers. The study found that Design Thinkers: engage optimistically, dialogue visually, explore empathetically, imagine possibilities, embrace collectively, and navigate uncertainty—see Figure 2 for descriptions of these capabilities.

These capabilities are not mystical gifts bestowed upon a selected few. In fact, the study found that many of these capabilities currently exist in organizations, but they lay dormant waiting to be untapped. For example, when participants were asked to describe the process used in their organization to solve problems, 88% of the time they used language that described working collaboratively and 53% of the time they used

Figure 2. Design Thinker Profile



language that described taking an empathetic approach. Conversely, language that described navigating uncertainty, imagining possibilities, and engaging optimistically were rarely mentioned as part of their organization’s problem-solving process. However, when asked to rate their own problem-solving capabilities on a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high), participants rated their own capabilities between 6 and 8. This suggests that individuals believe they have skills that are not fully utilized in their work. A comment from one participant further illustrates that while individuals may have these capabilities; organizations are set up in a way that does not enable them to thrive:

Sometimes it is just hard to maintain that optimism when there are so many forces around me that won’t support ideas. So, there is a constant tension between what I know to be an effective way to address issues and the real world around me. I know you are asking about me, yet I am, we all are, constrained by the organization in which we work. Chesson, 2017 ( pg 102).

That these capabilities exist to some degree in all of us is good news, but to be effective they need to be developed so they can be used to their full potential. Think of these skills as muscles—the more we use them the stronger they get.

### How Design Thinkers Facilitate Change

Failing to establish a compelling reason, lack of buy-in, and fear of uncertainty are often cited as key barriers to change (Kotter, 2011; Kegan & Lahey, 2008; Pardo del Val & Fuentes, 2003). Untapping the hidden Design Thinker potential in organizations can be a catalyst for overcoming these barriers.

#### Establishing the Why

Design Thinkers are empathic and human centered in their approach (Brown, 2008; Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011; Martin, 2009; Owen, 2005). They engage with customers and teams from across the organization to understand a problem deeply. For example, they engage with customers to understand not only how they use the company’s products and services but also to learn about the customer as a whole person (Brown, 2008; Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011). They are interested in the entire journey of the customer, not just how the customer interacts with the company. This holistic view of customers helps Design Thinkers discover unmet needs and pain points and develops empathy for the problems that people experience (Brown, 2008; Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011; Owen, 2005). Empathy helps Design Thinkers understand pain points which inspire solutions that alleviate the pain points. In the context of leading change, the capability of

empathy enables transformation because when teams feel connected to the pain points, they start to see why change is needed.

**Lack of Buy-In**

Another key reason that organizational change fails is lack of buy-in across the organization (Kotter, 2011). Organizations have a tendency to work in silos where departments don't engage with each other or understand the functions of each area. This means that a change that seems like a good idea from the point of view of one department might not be viewed the same from another department. Working in silos also makes it easy for those that are not involved in creating the change to dismiss it. Design Thinkers understand that good solutions are not created in a vacuum, so they bring together stakeholders from all areas of the business (Brown, 2008; Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011; Martin, 2009). They openly share the issues and engage others in discussing potential solutions. This way of working brings the entire organization on the change journey by engaging representatives from all areas. Change scholar-practitioners for decades have been calling for collaboration, open channels of communications, and early engagement as necessities for successful change implementation (Kotter, 2011; Hiatt, 2006). The Design Thinker approach organically enables these necessities for change.

**Clearing the Fog of Uncertainty**

Another key reason organizational change fail is a desire to hold on to what is, for fear of not knowing what might be (Kotter, 2011; Kegan & Lahey, 2008). Design Thinkers address this head on by engaging others in conversations about what "could be" to generate ideas (Brown, 2008; Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011). They capture ideas visually to

help further the conversation about what could be created. These types of discussions help people move beyond what they know to explore the unknown and to visualize possibilities. Imagining possibilities gets us a step closer to moving toward change but still questions of "how will it work" or "will it make a difference" linger. Design Thinkers address these types of questions by testing out ideas early on before too much is invested in them (Brown, 2008; Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011). They might take ideas to people who were not involved in coming up with them, or they might put ideas in front of customers, or test them out with friends and family. Design Thinkers find ways to make sure that what they plan to do will actually work and make a difference. Imagining possibilities and testing them out provides some certainties about what the future state might be like. With a clearer picture of what might be, change doesn't seem as scary as it once did.

Design Thinkers help shift mindsets about change first by focusing on why change is needed—to address pain points and create a better experience for stakeholders. Second, by working collaboratively which organically creates buy-in for new ways forward. Third, by easing fears of uncertainty through ideation, visualization, and testing. Even more encouraging is that Design Thinker capabilities are not mystical gifts that some people have, and others don't. These capabilities can be developed.

**Three Strategies for Untapping Dormant Capabilities**

OD Practitioners play a critical role in helping organizations expand their capabilities. Here are three strategies we can incorporate into

Table 1  
*Key Barriers to Change*

Key Barriers to Change	Design Thinker Capabilities the Overcome Barriers
Not understanding the why	Employs empathy and human-centeredness to establish a compelling reason why change is necessary
Lack of Buy-In	Understands that power of collaboration and brings people together to co-create solutions
Fear of uncertainty	Navigates uncertainty by confronting it and creating a vision for the future

the OD consulting process to help organizations awaken the dormant capabilities within their teams to overcome resistance to change.

**Be Your Own Customer**

Build empathy and promote a human centered approach by asking clients to be their own customer. Every employee of a company should know what it is like to be a customer of the organization for which they work. An effective way to do this is to have them engage with the company as if they were a customer. This does not have to be an elaborate exercise; it can be as simple as visiting your website and trying to buy a product or calling customer service to ask a question. Then facilitate discussions across the organization to share what was learned from the experience. Explore questions such as, “what was delightful,” “what was painful,” and “what would make the experience better?” This first-hand experience is a powerful tool that helps clients build empathy while surfacing pain points and helps develop a compelling case for change. This activity works well in the data gathering phase of an engagement.

**Day in the Life of...**

Break down silos and foster collectivity, by having one team invite another team to spend time with them to see what they do. For example, a few members from the sales team might come spend an hour with the accounting team. These types of interactions while at first may seem forced, over time they help foster relationships across departments and helps individuals see what life in

the organization it like for others. Once a team has spent some time seeing the organization through a different pair of eyes, facilitate discussions to share what the teams learned in observing each other’s work. This activity also works nicely in the data gathering phase of a client engagement where teams can participate in gathering information about the organization.

**Host “How Might We” Sessions**

In the feedback phase of a client engagement, share findings widely across the organization and ask teams to consider “how might we” questions. “How might we...make this better; ...solve this problem; ...move out of this situation.” Ask leaders of the organization to host “how might we” sessions with their teams. If collecting ideas live and in person isn’t practical, designate wall space where people can stick their thoughts on a post-it note or create a virtual space where people can post their suggestions. This activity helps teams see beyond what is and start to engage in possibilities. The ideas gathered then need to be incorporated when recommending actions and creating solutions—this is an important step in enabling teams to play a role in creating change.

**Conclusion**

Savvier consumers, the commoditization of technology, and globalization means that organizations will continue to exist in a state of constant change. Companies that can improve their rate of successful change implementation will gain

Table 2  
*Strategies for Untapping Design Thinker Capabilities*

Strategy	Capability	OD Phase
Be Your Own Customer	Build empathy by walking in the customer’s shoes	Data Gathering
Day in the Life of...	Improve collaboration by encouraging teams to spend time in another department	Data Gathering
How Might We	Foster the skill of imagining possibilities by facilitating sessions where teams can engage in ideation	Feedback

a competitive edge in the marketplace (Worley et al., 2014). Design Thinker capabilities present a way for organizations to overcome traditional barriers to change by creating a mindset shift in how individuals view change. The good news for organizations is that Design Thinker capabilities exist in their organizations today, but they go unrealized and unutilized (Chesson, 2017; Connell, 2013). By incorporating activities that help awaken these capabilities into client engagements, OD practitioners can help organization improve their capacity for driving change. Design Thinkers in collaboration with stakeholders, use empathy to create compelling reasons why change is needed. They demystify the uncertainty of the future and create a paradigm shift in which change is no longer something that happens to people, but rather something they help create.



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