Relationship Design: A Manifesto

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The thinking in this manifesto has been deeply influenced by Teddy Zmrhal, Global Vice President - Design and Innovation at Salesforce, who has taught me to see Relationship Design as a practice, and Fred Dust, whose soon-to-be-released book Making Conversation will be the focus of my next post.

We have made great advances in applying design to how people engage with things and how people engage with software. These advances have improved people's quality of life—and driven dramatic gains in productivity. The next frontier for design is to focus on a domain even more deeply connected to human flourishing: the domain of relationships. Design brings the gift of intentionality to how people engage with one another, come together to create shared meaning, build community from diversity, and advance common cause.

Relationship design has always been a part of the design field's endeavor, but we must give it new emphasis and resonance, and elevate it from ground to figure. Where interaction design intensifies our focus on the site of contact, relationship design pulls us back to the power of relationships as wholes. Where service design focuses on a defined episode of functional exchange, relationship design embraces the longer span and complex interplay of contexts in which we live our lives and forge connection to one another.

Relationship design has been hidden in plain sight; it is the essential active ingredient behind breakthroughs in multiple fields. Fueling the innovation of microcredit, for instance, was the relational power of circles, which achieved high payment rates among poor borrowers, at large scale and low cost, in a way that would never have been possible within the frame of atomized transactions between financial institutions and individuals.

Complex problems with complex causes can be unlocked by considering them relationally rather than technically. Seeking to understand how to improve outcomes for at-risk youth, The Search Institute created a Developmental Relationships Framework that codifies twenty specific actions that together contribute to relationships "through which young people discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them." Their research demonstrates how the presence of such a developmental relationship materially lowers high-school drop-out rates—a powerful, quantified outcome rooted in deep, organic human connection. Even the ultimate human condition, death, can be affected by relationship design—simple mechanisms that promote human connectedness and a sense of agency have a remarkable impact on the health outcomes of the elderly.

Relationship design lives deep in the fabric of some of the world's most stunningly successful businesses. Look at Starbucks through the lens of relationship design and one sees not only the superb execution of complex service design elements, such as the personalization of the drink and the cup, but the broader context of how Starbucks as a "third place" fits into the relational fabric of how its customers connect to one another. It is a commonplace that B2B businesses are relationship-driven, but the great ones use design to build lasting bonds of institutional connection that transcend the component elements of individual-to-individual connection. Relationship design illuminates the interdependent power of McKinsey's disciplines to cultivate lasting alumni relationships in a business model in which so many people are part of the firm only relatively briefly, their models for collaboration with clients in the crucible of solving hard problems, and their central focus on the durable partnership between a client service team and a broad set of client executives.

Both the Starbucks and the McKinsey examples illustrate how moving from service design to relationship design elevates focus from a point of connection to a constellation of people, in relationship with one another. Both Starbucks and McKinsey are intensely concerned with service design. Relationship design doesn't set this focus aside but encompasses it in a broader field. The exactitude of service design comes to live inside a broader, emergent flow of how people relate to a constellation of others. Salesforce has gone further than any company I know in explicitly articulating relationship design as a core capability and mindset. In Justin Maguire's long post Building Relationships By Design, laying out Salesforce's perspective on the practice, he quotes Salesforce colleague Kat Holmes, author of *Mismatch: How Inclusion Shapes Design*. Kat explains:

When we make a solution, an interface, a product, and put it out into the world, it becomes an intermediary for how people interact with one another. And the design consideration that goes into the kind of value they're trying to gain or give in that moment is incredibly important to emphasize, to understand.

Good relationship design both *turns toward*, with compassion to understand the broadest context of where another is coming from, and *turns outward*, creating a context in which people can experience reciprocity with others, a space in which people can both be themselves and be in company.

While a few companies are out in front regarding investment in the practice of relationship design, business represents only a small part of what's at stake. Relationship design is at the heart of questions core to our current challenges as a society:

- How we create dialogue and mutual valuing across lines of difference
- How we build trust and participation in our institutions
- How teachers, social workers, and others have the greatest personal impact on at-risk youth, in a situation in which direct face-to-face connection is limited
- How to combat social isolation for elderly individuals living alone
- How digital communities create social capital that can be marshaled as a force for collective action

To address such questions of public consequence, we must teach ourselves to see on a human scale. We must enliven the formal realm of public policy and design of public services with the intentional focus on the informal realm of how people relate to one another, and with creativity about how to catalyze the patterns of relating that advance flourishing. For the small business and the global enterprise, for the municipal office and our national agencies, relationship design will unlock progress and ensure resilience. Relationship design is a way of seeing the world, a force that adds depth and resonance to everything we build and everything we touch.

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