



IxDA Sydney Mentoring Program Podcast

08 - Marla Mitelman

Audio Transcript

Marla Mitelman

There's no shame in admitting you don't, that you don't know the answer. I think there's more in shame in admitting in lying and saying that you do.

Vinita Israni

Hello, and welcome to the IxDA Sydney MP pod, a show that guides you through the stages of design mentorship, whether you're just starting out as a baby sapling, or you're blossoming into a seasoned designer. I'm Vinita Israni, and in this episode, Sam and Molly are talking to Marla Mitelman. They're tackling some serious topics about building design teams and redefining culture, how to start growing designers with confidence and not arrogance, and how we can start challenging the status quo, whether that be for deliverables or managing stakeholders. Marla has been a leader of high performing design teams, as well as a hands on UX designer for over 20 years. She's passionate about the design of useful, usable and purposeful experiences for innovative products and services. She has designed co created and led the experience uplift and creation of digital products and services through both enterprise wide transformation projects, and brand new Zero to One digital product launches through Australia, Southeast Asia and Europe. Since 2020, she's been working both as a freelance design consultant through middle wind web, and has been employed permanently by organizations such as BCG, digital ventures, and PwC. To lead their experience and strategic design teams. We're really excited to share some awesome insights from Marla. But just to note that we've re recorded this episode due to audio quality, but there are still a couple of hops and bumps along the way. Let's get started.

Sam Hancock

How are you today?

Marla Mitelman

I'm fabulous today. Thanks, Sam. How are you?

Sam Hancock

Very well. Thank you. A quick question that we ask all of our guests is how was your 2021? And what new habits are you looking at rolling into 2022?

Marla Mitelman

my 2021 was probably one of the most challenging years I've ever had, which is probably not too dissimilar to the rest of the world. And I realized how much as an extrovert I need to be with other people and how much that feeds my soul and my creativity. And what kind of habits am I bringing into the next year, I'm trying to go a little bit slower, not take on so much. Practice a little bit of mindfulness and taking space for myself, which is not something I ever thought I would admit to doing.

Sam Hancock

Great. And as this is a mentor podcast, what does mentoring mean to you?

Marla Mitelman

I think it means learning from a multifaceted, multi dimensional mentor mentee relationship. So something I always really enjoy about being mentored and mentoring others is just personal growth that you gain and the exposure you get to other people's perspectives and working practices and how much



it's not just an exercise of imparting your knowledge on to others. It's taking their knowledge into yourself and improving the way that you work and, and learning from them too.

Sam Hancock

Okay, interesting. And is that something that just comes with experience?

Marla Mitelman

I don't know if it necessarily comes with experience. I mean, that I think is my personal sort of view that I've developed over the years. I learn a lot when I'm working with other people generally. So whether it's a direct mentoring relationship, or just guiding and working with other people on a project or any particular piece of work, I learned a lot from other people. And it's sometimes by osmosis. And you didn't realize that actually happening. And the same with a mentoring experience. I learned something from people every day. And to me, it's just been a source of great value in my life. And in my career.

Sam Hancock

And you still mentoring today?

Marla Mitelman

Yes, I do it in different forms. So I act as a design advisor, coach and mentor for the antler incubator. And they're a program that they run out of Australia, which is a pretty amazing program if you haven't seen it. And I've had some informal mentee relationships as well that I've had either through Project F, which is a really great organization that matches women with other similar women who are looking to progress there to get careers and get that support. And then, you know, people have reached out to me on the Sydney designers network and other Slack channels. And also I don't try and maintain relationships and connections with people who work for me or I've worked with in the past as well.

Sam Hancock

Okay, awesome. So that seems to be your your mentor engine seems to be more of a leadership type level. And I know you've had the pleasure of working and building teams that BCD digital ventures and pepper of other organizations. How have you throughout the years been able to grow as a design practitioner and the leader?

Marla Mitelman

Great question. It's interesting because I think as you as you sort of go up the ladder you get further away from actually being a hands on practitioner. So I found that actually quite struggling to start with because I was very much used to creating output and outcomes. And so all of a sudden, when the role becomes a little bit more guiding and supporting and creating at a much more strategic level, it can be quite a shock to the system. But I wouldn't say I necessarily just mentor at the leadership level either I work with really junior designers. And one thing I'm very passionate about is helping designers learn on the job, and not just fire academic studies, I'm not particularly an academic person, I'm a very practical person, I just think that should be almost like a cross dimensional mentor relationship. So it's not just leadership to leadership or anything like that, if that's what you were referring to.

Molly Lewis

That's a great point. And, and speaking of being more about practical learning, how do you keep growing in these strange pandemic times?

Marla Mitelman

It's a really good question. And I think that's actually my worry is that I don't learn and I don't grow. I think just going to events, being part of I FTAs, local leaders program has been great, because I've really learned a lot, you know, from, from the people I've met through that continually reading, even though I have 1000s, of things I've never read, but always been to, and just, you know, just trying to sort of tap into

people who are willing to share their knowledge and experience as well. So even if it can't be learning from an academic perspective, I'm, I'm learning on the job, as it were on on new projects and new things I take on.

Molly Lewis

Yeah, that's a really good point. And I'm kind of the same, I feel like my list of books keeps growing and growing. Do you actually have any book recommendations or podcasts for the audience to look into?

Marla Mitelman

I've sort of been less on the podcasting. Recently, I used to listen to the design better podcast and then a colleague of mine got me on to Debbie Norman's design matters as well, which I listen to you from time to time. books I've been reading have really been more related to work I've been doing with analysts, so one called obviously awesome, which is about value proposition creation by April Dunford. And another book called traction, which is about how the startup can achieve explosive customer growth. So less on this sort of design, centric side and drag design practitioner more into sort of what it takes to get product market fit and position products and take those into the market. So those are the two that I've been reading. But I have to admit, I've got a lot of bookmarks in my books of where I've put things down and then moved on to something else, which tends to happen to me quite a lot.

Molly Lewis

Yeah, you can definitely relate to that. And I just wanted to know, how do you find the balance between challenging yourself and then being too much when it comes to growth?

Marla Mitelman

Great question. I remember, look, I like to take on projects that actually have sketches out of me. But I will say a lot of projects, you scare the shit out of me, because sometimes you take something on, and you've never actually personally approached that problem from that direction before. But those are the kind of projects that really made me push harder and, and go further. Because then I'm really challenging myself. I think if I was to take on something that I just really knew how to do with every aspect, then I probably wouldn't get the growth that I want. So the joy of the work that we do is every problem resolved. It's different. And so actually, that's just something that continued to sort of find my way, I guess so. So I've been really lucky in that regard.

Sam Hancock

And has there been a struggle to work remotely as opposed to being face to face with your team day to day?

Marla Mitelman

I think it depends on the team. Actually, I have worked remotely on and off for quite a long time anyway. So that's something that I was quite used to doing. Particularly when I was working at DVM, we were working a large overseas project, but I think is a natural extrovert not being in a room with people. And you know, having those, I suppose serendipitous conversations and being in front of a whiteboard, that's been a bit of a struggle. What I have found is when I've got those working relationships, so there's personal physical relationships that I had in the suppose in the real world before in place, it has made working together remotely, just much faster. And collaborations been a lot easier. But, you know, I think as professionals in in working digital, we're so used to having to adapt anyway,

Sam Hancock

you mentioned that you already have relationships with certain people in order to spark that ways of working. They must be hard to hire for search and cultural fit when you're working remotely. How do you do this when deal with the challenges when you have hired someone and you're trying to work out their particular best ways of working?

Marla Mitelman

Yeah, that's been quite a challenge. And I think, like maybe culture fit isn't quite the right word to use, because it's becoming a bit of a dirty phrase, I'm starting to realize because, you know, culture is sort of the living, breathing thing rather than something that's static and state. There needs to be an investment in explaining how you worked with people who may not have worked with you before, and understanding people's working styles. And I can't say I've actually nailed that yet because like anyone I'm still working progress and I I'm learning absolutely every day and I make mistakes all the time. But I think being able to establish team norms, understanding how people work, especially remotely, some people might need like big blocks hours to really focus on a particular task or a problem. And then if you're pinging them on Slack every 10 minutes or trying to talk to them, you're really breaking that flow that they might have. So I think it's just trying to understand the people that you're working with and what their needs are, so that they can get the best use of their day, but also trying to create those times for so suppose team collaboration and bonding. However, you can do that remotely.

Molly Lewis

I think that leads nicely into understanding from your perspective, how working remote has hindered, I guess, team culture, or maybe having some of those rituals.

Marla Mitelman

Yeah, and look, I'm working with a great team at the moment, I only joined them last week, it's just a short piece of work. But they've set up the speaker could chew that they do every Friday, and everyone does 10 slides just to get to know each other. And I started on that last week. And and that was brilliant, just as a way to get to know people and to sort of start to create those little rituals in place. Yes.

Molly Lewis

I love that. That's such a good idea. And I wondered with working remote has that do you think hindered in your the quality of work? Where have you seen any changes in that aspect?

Marla Mitelman

Oh, God, no, definitely not. So I don't I don't think it's impacted the quality of work at all. And I think it's actually helped in some regards, as well. So people who don't have to think about getting their kids off to school and getting on the bus for an hour. And all of those things that happen when you know we have dealing with a global pandemic. Yes, of course, there's pressures on people when they're at home at the time. But I've actually not seen that it's degraded any quality of output at all. And at the end of the day, we're all adults. And we should be trusted as professionals. So I haven't seen that No.

Molly Lewis

100% agree, you know, will can handle like work life balance, I guess, in different ways. I just wondered, how do you find working with different types of designers? Or, you know, maybe different types of personalities?

Marla Mitelman

Well, I think we have to otherwise, how do you get any diversity of thought on a team? You know, I think you have to seek that out. Quite honestly, if we all wanted everybody who was like us, then wouldn't be a really boring, very staid work environment. But also where would that diversity of thinking come from? So you know, I think we always need to seek out people that are different to us and complimentary. And it's probably more the personality of collaboration, and sharing, and learning and natural curiosity. That's, that's what I seek for. And those can exist in a plethora of different personality traits.

Sam Hancock

So you mentioned with Ross previously that you had like a spreadsheet to work out best ways of working within your design team, you did that the V, right? Yeah, that

Marla Mitelman

was quite different. So when we put that together, that was really more of a matrix to understand how best to pair people on products and projects. So when we worked on ventures, we're very, very lucky because we actually got to work at the very early stage of that, where you're going into research, and you're trying to understand customer needs and problems. So we have designers all the way from interns, who we would essentially train up from the job all the way through to myself, who was the director at the time. And one thing that I was always very cognizant of, is making sure that you give people a role and a project that will stretch them, but also give them the support that they have in that growth pathway as well. So they're not fending for themselves. And I used to do that in multiple ways. So it could be that someone had never worked on an innovation sprint before, or they've never worked on an incubation, Sprint, all that never worked a new code that we had spun out. So it was my role to work really closely with our HR business partner, to really make sure that those people were staff on the projects that they would learn from, that they had that right support. So I would never put so for example, to associate designers on a big project together that would, that would be a recipe for pain and fear. And so that was always something I was very, very mindful of just to make sure that we were constantly ensuring that support network, but also that growth, because everybody learns from each other within those projects, as well. And we saw some amazing mentoring, informal mentoring relationships built out from there, too.

Sam Hancock

And how would that scale to larger teams and projects? Or do you using the same type of matching methodology?

Marla Mitelman

Well, I mean, I think it comes first of all, it's less control, bowsprit spreadsheet and more visualize that way, obviously, you need to have a really deep understanding of the people that you're matching as part of this process. So understanding what their what drives them, what they enjoy doing, where they need to build their skill sets out. So I think you can scale it however, what you do need is an understanding of all of those individuals. So that was on a team I think 17 designers we had I don't see any reason why you can extend that out you would just need to have that depth of understanding what what drives those individuals and and what they need from a learning pathway and mentorship perspective to

Molly Lewis

that's great point. on it. Do you have any other strategies in place in regards to teaming and collaboration?

Marla Mitelman

No, just continue to do it and see what works really, you know, I, I'm very lucky in that I get to work with lots of different design teams all the time. I think just going in with open ears and understanding that you are there to learn from them as well and not impose your way of working. Not everything works for every scenario. And I think you just need to be very cognizant of that, and aware that you need to adapt your approach sometimes.

Molly Lewis

Yeah, that makes sense. And I guess, you know, when you may be struggling with, you know, other people than the team and teamwork. Do you have any advice on how to deal with conflict?

Marla Mitelman

Again, it's this is one of those classic UX responses, isn't it? It depends. I personally, a very big advocate for clearing the air very early on and being quite direct. And I don't mean that in an aggressive, confrontational style, even though I used to do that, and I learned that was a terrible way to approach things. But I think, you know, conflict, Gemini comes out of a lack of communication or a misunderstanding. And I think if you can create an opportunity that gives people the right place to express themselves and also listen to what those challenges are, then I think you can work through anything, of course, there's going to be exceptions to those rules. And sometimes, you know, there's stuff going on at home that we just are not aware about that contributes to a conflict in the work environment. And I think you just as a leader, as a manager, as a human, you just need to be aware of what's going on below the surface as well.

Sam Hancock

Within this current climate hiring has possibly been the hardest that's ever been. We've personally had positions open for multiple months, and we've struggled Turman, whether they're a good balance between skill sets for our team and looking at a post to culture fit as well. How do you go through that kind of balancing act when hiring for a design team?

Marla Mitelman

I think the me approach and as I mentioned before, the disposition role, I'll say disposition rather than culture fit. Everybody has potential, I think what you need to see is do they play nice with others in regards to sort of how they fit within the team? And you can call that culture? You can call that whatever you like? How's it? How challenging is it been, I think it's been super challenging, just in the sense that there's been a huge demand for designers, that's really ramped up in the last sort of 18 months or so. And I think that sometimes there's a bit of a disconnect between what you need and and what the expectation is, for those just newly entering the industry. Like anything, it's really good to have a very clear process for how you recruit. And over the last couple of years, I have been recruiting designers in multiple countries around the world. So in 2020, I was tasked with building out a team and putting the growth of that team in Portugal, we also looked at hiring a team in Malaysia for another project I was on. So you know, I think as long as you have a very clear view of what you need, but also does that person have the potential to growth? And then do you have the room to support that growth as well and take them through that pathway? You know, I think it's, it's like anything, it's, it's one of those challenges that you have to face constantly. But I don't think it's the biggest problem in the world. I think the challenge sometimes is retaining people. Because you know, we do have a really hot market right now. And I see sort of people leaving roles quite a lot. So I think that what's really important for organizations and companies is to ensure that you're giving people the right work, and you're empowering them as designers, and you're giving them a place to stay, but also to grow into as well. You know, at the end of the day, people don't look for jobs just for the monetary factor, even though that is very compelling to go they're looking for, they're looking for challenge and they're looking for something that makes them happy. And I started to look more at the it's just a project I want to take on is the kind of client I want to have. And those kinds of aspects, I think apply to to hiring as well. So I think those are the questions that designers should ask when they're, they're looking for roles, or they're looking for for new workplaces and teams to join.

Sam Hancock

And when they are looking for new roles and teams to join, how important is the right balance of technical skills and soft skills when going into those more senior positions?

Marla Mitelman

Well, I guess it depends on the role again, so soft skills, and maybe let's just call them you know, more business and communication skills, because they're not really that soft. They're pretty bloody important and soft, sort of sometimes. They're not as relevant as technical skills. But I think, you know, I think you can teach pretty much most people the technical skills, if they have the proclivity and the want to learn, I

think you have to have that you have to identify who those people are, who could be really brilliant leaders, and you have to nurture that kind of experience and talent as well. So I think they're both equally important. As I said, depending on the role you're in depends on what that level of technical hands on tools you need to be in every day. I don't have to do Not very much anymore. I don't have to dip in and out a bit. But that's the kind of stuff if somebody knows, say, for example, sketch, they can learn figma, they can learn, you know, they might already know illustrator, they can learn another tool. So, you know, if you've got that core, I don't think that's the hardest part. I think it's more about process that wraps all of those together, and that willingness to learn and learn new techniques and learn from others, and not believe that you know the answer, but know that you believe that you have the method to get to the answer.

Molly Lewis

Yeah, that's a great point. And I guess, I wonder how do you create that culture of curiosity and, you know, wanting to learn more and around the methods as well, rather than than practical, maybe

Marla Mitelman

technical skills? I think there's so many ways you can do it, you know, I mean, I had, and I was very lucky to be a part of a really incredible design team at Divi, but I didn't set that up, I came in, and I inherited something that was already great to begin with. And I was then given the custody to grow that internet that even further. And we made sure, well, okay, so when we talk about culture, what we're really talking about is an ethos that we all subscribe to, and we will buy into, and a reason for us all being there. And that's sort of what I put around the word culture. And also, there's certain behaviors that get exhibited as well. So for example, when I worked at Divi, we had an amazing team of designers, up to when I first started there, none of us used to meet because we were always just singular designers in the experience design cohort on our own project. So what that meant was, we didn't really have that culture of cross communication or sharing across the cohort, because everybody was deployed, sometimes in different countries. So we did a couple of things. First of all, we changed the way that teaming works. And he always had a design pair. And this is the complementary and matrix skill set that I talked about across before. So you always have someone to sort of guide and support you and, and also, you know, round out that particular set of skills that you might not be so strong in. What we also did was we set up fortnightly meetings. So where we could appropriately share work, we would share work across the team. And everybody had a bit of a show and tell and we caught up very, very regularly. And then we would have off sites and make sure that we had things that are an active activities that brought us together. So whether it was karaoke, which anyone who has worked with me will tell you I'm a huge fan of, or picnics in the park or sleep rooms, or even just having a breakfast every fortnight or every month, we would make sure that we dedicated that time to spend together. And so one time I remember we had a dial in for all of the designers and I think they were in Malaysia, Miami, Melbourne, Sydney, and it was just, you know, to me, it was wonderful that people who quite rightly didn't have to join that it was like 738 o'clock and their local time zones wanted to tap into that existing meeting that we already had, and that get together. And to me that just said that something was working right.

Molly Lewis

Yeah, that's so cool. Especially having a bit more of a global community as well. And I must say, when you said karaoke, I definitely miss that. Personally strange COVID times.

Marla Mitelman

Oh, you have no idea me to meet you.

Molly Lewis

Changing topics slightly? Well, kind of related to open mindsets? How do you stay through politics within the workplace? Maybe not necessarily in your team, but with clients?

Marla Mitelman

I mean, it's just the constant challenge that you have in even if a friend dynamic, let alone in a work dynamic, you know, people pose political problems from time to time, and sometimes you might be the person that's causing it. I've got better at that. I hope, as I've got older, I think I've realized, what are the drill holes I'm going to die on? What are the points that I can just walk away from? I think with politics, it just comes back down to understanding people and understanding people's motivations. And, you know, as designers, sometimes, you know, there's this constant phrase of fighting for a seat at the table. I think we're almost sitting at that table, I think what we need to do now is sort of extend out a little bit further and understand those other roles and how we can support those that might sit in a leadership team or, or that may not might understand or need guidance from how you can apply design techniques to support a business or to take a strategy forward. So when it comes to politics, I think before I used to be terrible at that, because I used to come in with like a bit of a blunt force attack and bang things over the head. And now I've sort of realized that I need to sort of sit back and listen and take more of a more of a passive approach. But understanding what are the battles you want to fight? And also who can help you who can you align with? I hope that answered the question.

Molly Lewis

And know that did realizing that you have other people to lean on or to gain support in those situations, when you're dealing with different areas of the business, and you don't necessarily have the answer. And that exact moment. What would you recommend to do in that situation?

Marla Mitelman

Ask questions, talk to people do research, all of the tools that we have in our in our toolset as human centered designers. If you don't have the answer, a great quote was given to me by a manager I had about 24 years ago. I once said to her, I don't know the answer that she said, No, the correct answer is, I'll find out. So if you don't answer, go find out. None of us had the answers to everything. But we do have a lot of great ways to find that out. And to learn.

Sam Hancock

And throughout your career, I know you've worked across consultancies agencies and on client side, how is that not knowing being different across the different types of work that you've worked across? Or is it stayed the same?

Marla Mitelman

I actually think that when you're working client side, you still have a client, it's just a different type of client. There's always someone you're designing for. So obviously, we have business stakeholders, there's people who hold to us and we need to make sure that we're delivering value back to the business, as well as you know, designing for users. So whether you're designing for a client that might be via consultancy, so either, by the way, that BCG digital ventures or by the consultancy, I have myself, it's exactly the same as if I was within a design team and organization, I believe, I don't really sort of seeing it has been that different. I've learned a lot about client management over the years. And I think, you know, as long as you as an individual build trust, it doesn't matter who your client is,

Sam Hancock

from a consultant perspective, save they're quite Junior Ronnie, couple of years of experience, then what you're saying is, there's no shame in saying, Look, I actually actually don't know this. I know. I know, some some clients turn around and say, Well, what am I paying for? If you don't know this? Well, what would you? What would you say to that?

Marla Mitelman

Again, some It depends, you know, if someone's saying to me, you know, what are what is privacy, definitely compliance, or probably one compliance or Wikiversity. Remember, the right MC says, then

that's something that you probably do want to know, as a UX designer. And that's what they're paying you for. If someone that, to me is just the skills inherent in your roles, and if you don't know that you would know who to isolate or to ask that question at all, how to get informed. However, if someone's saying to you, is this the right solution for this particular problem? I don't think any designer could stand their hand on heart and go, Yes, I think we need to say, I don't know, we need to test it, we need to validate it, we need to check. And so I think that there's a time and a place for confidence. But competence is different to arrogance. And arrogance is I think, where people assume that you have the answer. Whereas competence is no progress on the methods that you need to work through to get the answer.

Sam Hancock

So even if you've worked on a very, very similar project, we've seen problem space, and you can lean on previous experience, we would still kind of go that approach. Now. Because I think,

Marla Mitelman

again, it depends, you know, I don't think there's one approach to every problem. But I do think, you know, someone, I mean, look, I can go in and say, you're probably going to have a few problems with how you structured that navigational element, or how you created the IO or something like that. That's something that comes I think, from knowledge and experience, regardless of, of how much of that you have. I think there's people paying for you advice, and to consult on the right approach to take. And I think that is something that you can demonstrate with confidence. And I think that's what they're paying you for to bring that level of expertise. But you know, to expect a designer to say that they've got the right design, the first go, you know, that's a different kind of confidence. And that's a different kind of answer. So I guess back to my comment before, which is going to get really boring, it really depends.

Sam Hancock

So coming from a consultant perspective, we were often coming from this approach, where you have a statement of work, and you're asked to produce these certain artifacts, which sometimes aren't necessarily providing value to the customer. But you're just doing it, because it's on the SJW. How do you get around these types of problems and say, Look, we're not doing this, we shouldn't be producing this, we should be doing a certain other thing instead.

Marla Mitelman

Yeah, that's a hard one. And I can think of quite a few scenarios where I've gone into roles. And I've seen a list of so W's. And it's almost like, the business manager who has, you know, got that sale over the line, has given a shopping list of items, and we've just checked them off. And so I've seen that quite a few times. And if I can find a bit frustrating because you don't want to just create outputs, for the sake of outputs, you want to create outcomes and artifacts that drive those outcomes. So there's a couple of ways you can approach it. I mean, it's a bit difficult when an Esso W is a basically a legal document that says this is what we'll be delivering to try and deviate from that. But I do think that potentially you could have an opportunity to talk to your clients or whomever you're delivering work for and just understand what they're trying to do. And then maybe explain in the context of so when you can ask to produce x. But that might not be a high value, outcome or output that drives the next piece of the design and have that conversation and see what trade offs you can make. So I've seen that happen quite a lot. And it is a challenge. I mean, at the end of the day, when I'm making for work, sometimes I'm asked to do that. But more often than not, I'm asked to sort of show a method for how we will deliver on the objectives of the project. And then I talk about the kinds of artifacts that we might produce, depending on what we're learning. And depending on what we need to do at the time, so we're not so locked into, you have to create X, Y, and Zed. But it is a hard one. It's a challenge. And I think, you know, if you're working in an organization that is essentially selling that list of artifacts, I think there needs to be a very strong conversation about why that's happening. One thing I've done in the past, I remember, particularly a project for a bank for about 10 or 12 years ago, and we were asked to create one asset before and I've been working UX a while. And the question that I have for the team was, could you please explain to me

what this is, and how we'll use it to inform the next stage of design? Because the clients gonna ask me that, and I can't tell them right now. And I think, you know, just having that conversation at the outset, if you don't know what it informs, and it's just a piece of delivery for the sake of taking something off a box, then, you know, I think you are at the right time and in the right way, I think you're completely entitled to challenge that. But it's not we're not going to do it, it's what would be better, what would be better to replace that particular piece?

Sam Hancock

So I guess that's kind of going straight back to having that overarching view of what the business wants and what the business needs, which every single designer needs, right.

Marla Mitelman

Yeah, I mean, definitely, because at the end of the day, you know, we do need to deliver business outcomes, they are the ones that employ us, they're the ones that click the business case. And we we do have to understand how the value of what we're creating delivers value back to the business. But I also think we need to understand why Why have you asked for that? What does it what does it inform, and maybe there's a different way to deliver that.

Molly Lewis

It's a great point. Now, Mala, I'm gonna ask you an interesting question. So where do you think that you may have failed as a leader, or maybe a more senior designer?

Marla Mitelman

Oh, so many times I failed. So many, so many times, I probably failed more than I've succeeded. But what I tend to do is try and learn from those experiences, I can tell you a time I failed in my negotiation skills a long time ago, and I actually use it was the subject of a talk a few years back. And I was working for a large telco on a huge transformation project and as part of scale at my wit's because I was essentially leading the design for an entire retail platform that was then moving into electronic bill presentment, and payment. And we were working with a very large consultancy, whose name I will not name, who were arguing with us over the quality of the work that we had created. So for example, there was something on the right hand stack, it was a full width table. And those are days where you'd have fixed viewport sizes, and I think was really elastic or scaling. And this piece of functionality fell to the bottom of the of the screen. And I argued in that meeting for about an hour. unsuccessfully, I might add, that that was broken, and that the company responsible needed to fix that, because that's a customer would notice, and I shoot so hard. But at the end of that I lost by the way, he went in production with it, I was mortified. But I remember coming at that meeting and saying to my boss, oh, my God, and he goes, how are you and I burst into tears. It was so emotionally draining for me to sort of try and argue about this, this piece of functionality. But what I learned from that is that was not the right approach. I was essentially, you know, meeting fire with fire. And what I learned from that was something that I needed to adapt the way that we worked so that I never had to have that conversation ever again. And I remember it was always a site about what is considered cosmetic defects. And that was always a priority five, and it never got fixed. And I just changed the way that we categorize defects this particular project. And then I did the same thing in my, in my subsequent roles as well, which was, is a customer gonna notice. If a customer's going to notice it is definitely going to be fixed. And if it's not, then then you could probably let that go. And maybe you've saved that fight for another day. But I think what I realized from that, and I think it's a leadership lesson, but I just think it's a general sort of communication lesson is, you know, number one, you're gonna die on a number two, like, what what am I doing wrong, that I'm not cutting through in my communication. And I think in my early days, not even just as a leader, but as a designer, as well as I'd go in like a full on battering ram. And I try and argue and try and be great. And a really big colleague of mine once said to him, You know what, you don't have to be right. And it was the best thing I've ever heard. Because he he was right. I don't need to be right. So yeah, I fail all the time. That's just one example. I'm sure I can think of 1000 more.

And that's a great example. And even better advice that it's so easy to get caught up, you know, and problems. And sometimes you do just need to take that step back. Do you think that's, you know, a big challenge as a designer is just finding that balance between business goals and user

goals? All the time? Absolutely. I think that's one of the biggest challenges we face. One, I suppose tactic I've tried to implement is only by top what you can do super well, you know, so if you're trying to meet business goals, you're trying to meet user goals. It might be sometimes there's an overlap of that, that has some kind of dissonance. So for example, the user goals are obviously I'm just making stuff up now, you know, ultimate simplicity. And they need to be open to accounting, you know, less than 20 minutes or whatever it might be, and I'm just making up KPIs. But the business goals might be we need to capture 117 pieces of information. So immediately, there's to things that conflict, the business goals and the user goals. And I think it's our job as designers to understand and challenge why, and to really help educate and not in a patronizing way. It's almost rather than educating. We're trying to coach and improve other people's knowledge in what we do in the same way. We're trying to learn what motivates them, what drives their roles as well, and how we can equally make each other successful.

Sam Hancock

If you're a senior designer, building out teams in relatively low maturity organizations, how do you break the barriers at sea level to get design more widely adopted?

Marla Mitelman

Yeah, it's the classic question, isn't it really? Well, first of all, if you're a designer and organization, you're building a team, that's a great indicator that they're seeing the value of design and are willing to invest in it. So that's a great tip right there. But I think, as designers, we've got to be very careful that we don't paint ourselves into a corner, where we are purists. And what I mean by that is, you know, there's nothing special about us, we are not snowflakes, I said this on multiple panels I've been on, we are just humans with a different kind of skill set. And I think it's up to us to empower other people to understand why we do what we do, and equally for them to empower stress to understand why they do what they do. So I think the first battle is, you know, already solved because you've got that investment. You've they've hired a designer, and now you've been tasked with building out the team. So the next part is create allies, tell people why you're doing what you're doing, explain how that drives value back into the business, or increases productivity or whatever metric you can think of. So that you're not just talking about design, you're demonstrating its value as well. And I think you're starting to see, we're starting to see now that there is a a bit of a change. Now, people are seeing the value of experience design. And they also see what happens when you fail that experience, and the negative impact that can have on the business. So in a way, all of those terrible flaws that are happening to other organizations are really not invested in their, in their customer experience, or they haven't invested in what we perceive to be designed, I think, in a way sort of paving the way for success to us and other in other domains.

Sam Hancock

And back to the kind of great resignation. I know, there's a lot of people out there looking for jobs right now and how looking at how important that is to see people within leadership positions with strengths in design, how, how important is that for, for people who are looking for jobs?

Marla Mitelman

I think it depends on the person, I think it depends on the role that they're going into in the company they're going into, I mean, I've been very lucky in that I've worked for organizations that have Chief Design officers, and I have colleagues who have gone on to become Chief Experience officers. And the value of that role is really sort of shown in the quality of the products and the services that they that they produce. And so I think for young designers going into an organization, I think it all depends on what stage you're at in your career and what you're looking to learn, and what's important to you. And it could be

that at a young designer going in might not have any design design leadership that they can look up to. But you might have a really amazing head of engineering, who's got a passion about design, you might have somebody who comes from the other side of the business on the commercial side who, you know, loves sketching in their spare time, or is doing a human centered design course, or learning about design thinking whatever it might be. So even though, you know, the pinnacle, I guess, is going into an organization that has very strong leadership at the at the C suite or the next level del c minus one, I do think there's a lot of opportunity for people to almost start that design option and maturity themselves. So I think there's a lot of opportunity there to

Sam Hancock

do that. And I guess from that the looking more than just into more than just wireframes and UI frameworks and learning about the business as a whole right there. I think we covered that in in areas before. But as a designer who would have maybe two to five years worth of experience, what type of areas would you suggest and looking into to learn more about the business that they're in?

Marla Mitelman

I think we need to understand the cost of what it takes to produce what we're designing. And I think that's something that is really important, because every change that we make is is going to have a monetary cost associated with it. You know, it's not free to build stuff, quite frankly, unless you're, unless you're no code, prototype girl, or if you're doing yourself, it's just not fair in a business context. So I think we need to understand, you know, what are the drivers of the business and what it costs to make design changes, because if you suddenly just redesign an interface, because you thought it was better two weeks later, that could be you know, \$40,000 to build that into production. I think understanding basic project management and how the costing of projects and design works, I think is really important as well. And I think at the end of the Davis is just about getting a little bit more well rounded as a human and as, as a professional, you know, I was very, very lucky because I started my career as a producer. So in my role as a producer, I would cost the work, I would manage the work and it was my job to also manage it under budget. So, you know, I went in very early with an understanding of what what something takes and, and what something cost to produce. But I think I sort of lost that along the way. And then I became a bit of a purist and I had to really adapt my approach to be much more of a pragmatist as I progress later in life. But at the end of the day, just be curious, ask people questions, you know, we don't exist in isolation to each other. We exist in our organization, as collaborators and as part of a team that's spread the learnings as well as the love.

That's such a great message. Now thinking more about projects, how do you resource or match the right people to the right projects or pieces of work?

So it depends on the project I'm doing again. So when I was at Divi, and the matrix that I talked about, where I really understood the skills and the learning goals, the team was was how I would do that a dB. When I'm working on projects on my own business, there's a there's a couple of things at the moment. Availability is probably the first one because that seems to be the deciding factor. And he can get on projects. So available his first one who's available. Second of all, you know, what am I looking for, and which bits are the most important from a skills profile and staffing profile? So it's the same role that a recruiter does or is anybody who is running a team, you need to understand exactly what you need for the project and the skills of the people that you have at your disposal. terrible word. I think you know what I mean, so that you can get the right outcome for the client, but you're not going to shift out of designers and throwing them into things that they can't do or that they've not supported well enough to achieve. But at the same time, you're pushing them on board. It's that delicate balance, isn't it?

Sam Hancock

Cool. Well, it's been amazing having you on today. And yeah, we've been great. Hearing all of your insights. Thank you very much.



Marla Mitelman

Thanks for including me, Sam and Molly, it was really lovely to talk to you again too.

Vinita Israni

And that concludes our latest episode of The IxDA Sydney MP pod. If you want to learn more about IxDA Sydney's events and mentorship programs, please visit [ixda.org](https://www.ixda.org/sydney) See you next time.

Marla Mitelman

Hi, I'm Marla Mittleman. And today you've been listening to the IxDA mentoring podcast

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