

Design as a management tool - the 'art' of management

SYNOPSIS:

In the necessary process of defining to a letter operational tasks in order to manage programmes and budgets, other even more important management objectives can be sometimes missed. The positive and negative role of design within this is not always appreciated.

Design and designers are for the most part not held in great esteem by management. They are on occasions a necessary evil, one to be held firmly in check by project managers who will prescribe what the designers must do and thereafter limit any excess or irrelevance. On occasions they are a useful part of marketing, called in to help promote an image or, more cynically, used to flatter the egos of senior management. But as a 'management tool', as a way of communicating or implementing various management objectives, they are unlikely to be considered.

The project for Tasco Europe

It is refreshing therefore to see how design has been used in a project just now starting to take shape in Glasgow. The project (for Tasco Europe) is unusual, partly in its parentage (it is a joint venture between Shell and Ernst & Young, and has at its heart new and innovative ideas about management), partly in the fact that the organisation has grown as the design has grown - from being an idea, to a joint commitment to a recruitment programme to a training programme, to a workforce of approximately 120 at the time of writing. By the end of 1998 it aims to have over 200 employees and by mid-1999 a total complement of over 400 - as a first location.

The project has had the luxury of gradual evolution and the convenience of a clean beginning, without the usual clutter of middle management scepticism and self-interest. It has however grown very fast and the temptation must have always been there to prescribe what was required and shut down the risks associated with design or open-ended thinking. However to say that the project has enjoyed the luxury of creativity is in no way to say that it has been characterised by extravagance or an atmosphere of laissez faire. Far from it. Project management has been central to the entire exercise - it is only that design has been harnessed within this total process; that its ability to assist in achieving the overall objectives has been appreciated.

An evolutionary process

An enlightened approach to design - that which sees design as part of a process rather than the production of a finite object - recognises the fact that its task is never done, that it is bound to evolve as the organisation which it supports evolves; that the process is one of continual proposition, testing and feedback. This is how the process of management was conceived for the new organisation, as a constant setting of targets, monitoring against targets, quantitative and qualitative analysis and the setting of new targets. The design process therefore sat comfortably within the management of the project as a whole.

The business of Tasco Europe

On the face of it, the business of Tasco would not appear to be an obvious candidate for the harnessing of design. Accountancy and order-processing from a distance (for Shell in the first instance and for other multi-nationals in due course) is not immediately thought of in terms of innovative office environments and staff participation. But when seen as part of the need to create an essentially different work ethos and create an entirely new type of organisation the relevance becomes clearer. The management logic behind the new company involves "down sizing", "outsourcing" and "empowering". Not only did the opportunity exist technologically to carry out a variety of accountancy processes remote from customer bases, but the opportunity existed to create a workforce with a different ethos from the thorough but essentially conservative nature of the parent organisations. Like all major organisations experiencing greater competition and the need to be even more responsive to changing markets, Tasco's prime objective was to reinvent the nature of its business and then provide an atmosphere in which it could continue to be reinvented - to engender a kind of "creative anarchy" as it was explained to the design team.

Design as part of the business process

Thus, to enter what is now "an accountants office" and find it full of bright colours and with an air of distinct informality might not seem too strange. The contribution of design has however gone much further than this creation of an immediate impression, important though it indeed is.

The story starts with the appointment of the design team and goes on thereafter as a gradual but formal process of proposal and review, in a manner which is different from most "project managed" design projects.

It is now common practice for the design team to be handed at appointment a comprehensive brief, setting out organisational requirements complete to the size and number of desks, the location and exact fitting out of the photocopy or kitchen areas. The Tasco design team were given nothing other than a key date when the business was due to go live, and otherwise a spirited description by the new chief executive of the character of the organisation itself. In this first meeting, held with beguiling informality, were the ingredients of a series of activities which made the design process different.

Not only was there no prescription in the form of a comprehensive brief and not only was a direct relationship with senior management established from the very start, but the "design briefing" significantly incorporated all the members of the team (those involved with property search, recruitment, marketing, IT, process planning, project management, as well as the architects and engineers) thereby drawing no distinction between the physical design process and the rest of the process required to get the new business up and running. The objectives were spelled out in business terms and were bought into by the total team. In addition, the meeting took place at the earliest opportunity and set up a process of proposal and review which then unfolded in parallel with the evolution of the organisation itself. Without there being an existing organisation it might be cynically suggested that such a process of symbiotic growth was inevitable. Another route however and a much simpler one to have followed, might have been to map out a comprehensive set of requirements without the inconvenience of their having to reflect reality, and without their having to be bought into by other members of the team.

Such a route would have been efficient to mobilise and simple to project manage. It could have delivered on programme and budget; it might not however have delivered on what was actually required in supporting a motivated, flexible, efficient, and re-inventive organisation.

The truth is that with or without an existing organisation it is not possible to know in advance exactly what is required, and, to set up such a finite system, is to deny the process of evolution - of inspired or accidental innovation, of testing and feedback. It is safe but it is essentially static - something which Tasco had already identified as being an unacceptable option.

Design as a management tool

Design exhibits itself in visual imagery and also in logical spatial planning. It is also a vehicle for engaging in managerial debate, and at a level which can include all members of the organisation. Thus, having open or enclosed coffee break areas, central or localised filing are not just about housekeeping, about what looks tidy or what is convenient in the short term, but are subjects which strike at the heart of management style. At stake are issues of staff trust, internal democracy, innovative systems and processes. The apparently trivial subjects include issues which, when they are debated, involve strong opinions, often highlighting differences in perspective between management and staff. In such discussions the designer is not in a position to say what is right. He can however act as 'agent provocateur' in flushing out contradictory opinions, and in stimulating the exploration of alternative forms of operation.

So it was that in the gradual formation of the Tasco brief issues such as break areas, meeting spaces, desk types, filing, security, reception, mail room, and training facilities, were all used deliberately or inadvertently in debating the nature of the new organisation itself.

The particular Tasco experience

In this description of the holistic, evolutionary Tasco process, a weakness might have been detected in that, with only a skeleton representation* of the new organisation available to be engaged in debate, feedback was possibly not relevant. This was a shortcoming that was appreciated and addressed in various ways:

The first was to include in discussions at least those people who were available over and above the immediate design team. Thus formal and informal presentations were made to the interim management team and when new ideas were put forward by the design team, whether it be about printer locations or video conference rooms, these proposals required discussion and signing off by *someone* with a user perspective - as a project control mechanism, but also to ensure that associated issues had been brought to light, at least where possible.

The second was to approach cautiously anything that might not be changeable later. This included the basic space planning and the location of key building fixes**, and those systems which once bought into are expensive to escape - such as the choice of system furniture. With the choice of these fixes, the team had to rely on experience, option appraisal and, in the case of furniture selection, the fairly elaborate process of performance specification, open tendering and testing by means of comprehensive mock-ups.

The third was to limit the fixity of items which need not be permanent. Deliberately however a distinction was drawn between items seen as neutral or requiring almost daily reorganisation to suit team working, and those 'landmark' elements positioned like coral reefs to structure the sea of open-plan desking and used to promote colonisation of some yet undefined activity. Unlike the preciousness now invested with real coral reefs however, these locating objects were seen as disposable over time - stimulating, beautiful even, but not precious, certainly capable of being repainted, adapted and repositioned when necessary. A general pallet was built up therefore of materials that were cheap but usable in a quality manner like the flats of a stage set, essential for providing a sense of place, but ephemeral. As such they could also be provocative, inviting future generations of occupants, who might not like them, to do something better.

The "Induction Nest"

A particular incident in the development of the project was used to full effect in setting this ethos of deliberate non-preciousness. It was known from the start that training would need to commence before even the first phase of building works could be delivered. The possibilities of renting space in a local hotel or taking on temporary serviced space were considered. Some of these possibilities even looked good financially, not to say attractive in a programme already a little frantic in terms of securing leases, appointing contractors and setting building budgets.

The Tasco chief executive pushed very hard from the start however for this Training / Induction function to take place on site, where a sense of Tasco ownership and identity could be established and where Tasco staff could feel from the moment they started that their organisation was something different.

In building terms some very rapid planning had to be put into place. A license to carry out works was secured two weeks before the start of training itself. Builders excelled themselves, working round the clock and a "stage set" was presented on time with the paint still having to dry.

In design terms the exercise did several things. It showed what was possible with colour and graphics, and the positioning of a few key objects. More importantly it broke down any pretensions towards preciousness and served as an immediate and then ongoing source of feedback. It was discovered that neither the chief executive nor chairman were put out by a lime green entrance area, it taught critical things about the arrangement of training spaces, about the appropriate degree of separation between administration and staff, about the need for quiet rooms, about the extent and configuration of underfloor cabling.

In proper management fashion the exercise has since been analysed and the lessons incorporated in both the design and the design process for later stages.

The effect of the overall building on the design process

The building chosen by Tasco for their new headquarters happens to consist of ground and six upper floors. While the size of these floorplates was identified at the time of building appraisal as slightly smaller than ideally required, the stack of floor space has proved useful as the project has unfolded. One floor has become what is now known as the "Induction Nest", described above. One floor has become the home of the management contractor and the storage of recyclable material. Individual floors are available for handover as they are completed and as the Tasco workforce builds up. Most importantly the process of testing and feedback, started with the Induction Nest, has continued and the persons now involved in debating the business process and the design support system are Tasco employees. Ownership is being transferred imperceptibly and, with it, the understanding that the nature of the building is part of the business itself. It is being discovered that certain things can easily change, that other things are preferably not changed and that team members can indeed take charge of their own lives.

Overall result

To visit the Tasco building is not to admire a beautiful set piece. At present a contractor is still on site. The metaphorical skip outside the front door might never be removed. There are pictures and charts stuck all over the walls - sometimes on pinboards, sometimes in places where it is now being identified that pinboards ought to be.

Some desks are clustered, others are set straight, but are not yet occupied. Coffee stains have appeared even beyond the generous wipe clean areas of the coffee points, but there is movement and constant discussion. Some slightly strange tables have appeared which are quite deliberately too high to sit down at and white boards wallpaper some areas from floor to ceiling with pens at hand to illustrate what can't be explained by merely waving hands. Designs have started to appear for movable "work walls", a "knowledge room" and an "information distribution area". A corner, designated for lockers, has now been fitted out but in a slightly different way from what was originally envisaged. Some of the more wacky ideas might never see the light of day, others have yet to emerge. In the meantime, the lime green has not just survived but has been adopted as a corporate colour !

The effect of working in this different manner might not be immediately obvious and its effectiveness (as in the effectiveness of the Tasco business itself) will not be proven for a little time yet. Nor will the contribution of design and the design process to the success of the business be easy to calculate. In the meantime however a sense of optimism prevails and, if creating a new work ethos is about starting off with the appropriate attitude then the project may already be deemed a partial success. It is not often that one gets the opportunity to test new design methodologies. Let us hope therefore that the thought and effort that has been put into the exercise so far, as well as the evaluation to date, is maintained over the continued life of the company.

*to establish the new organisation an "interim management" team was set up, drawn mostly from Ernst & Young, mirroring the different management roles due to be performed by Tasco itself. This interim management team which included the building project managers effectively acted as client to the design team

**one of these fixes was identified as the location of patch panels, something inherited from a previous occupant, and ironically found to be in awkward and arbitrary positions on almost every floor

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