

Management in Action

IDEO's Culture Reinforces Helping Behavior

IDEO is a company that has won many awards for its “human-centered, design-based approach to helping organizations” improve and grow. They have helped hundreds of companies in many industries to innovate and improve customer satisfaction and profitability. Tim Brown, president and CEO, describes design thinking as “a human-centered approach to innovation that draws from the designer’s toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success.”⁹³ IDEO’s success is built on a culture that values, reinforces, and supports helping behavior.

Helping behavior must be actively nurtured because it is discretionary. At IDEO helping others and collaborating for the good of a client is the norm. This case is based on results from a study of IDEO’s culture and

design process. The investigators identified four keys to achieving helping behavior and collaboration.

Leadership Conviction

Not every large company’s leader would, if asked about organizational priorities, bring up the topic of encouraging collaborative help in the ranks. But IDEO’s leadership is explicitly focused on it. For Tim Brown, the CEO, that’s not only because the problems IDEO is asked to solve require extreme creativity; it’s also because they have become more complicated. Brown says, “I believe that the more complex the problem, the more help you need. And that’s the kind of stuff we’re getting asked to tackle, so we need to figure out how to have a culture where help is much, much more embedded.” Essentially, this is a conviction that many minds make bright work.

Leaders at IDEO prove their conviction by giving and seeking help themselves. For example, we observed

a particularly successful event (in terms of new ideas generated) when a C-suite-level [senior executives] helper joined a team for an hour-long brainstorming session. The team's project hadn't even formally kicked off yet, so it was not a situation in which help was desperately needed. Nor was this leader the only one qualified to provide it. His arrival in the room signaled strongly that helping is an expected behavior in the culture and that everyone is part of the helping network.

The Two Sides of the Helping Coin

Because most cultures have norms of reciprocity, getting help from others can put you in their debt. Even if you are unfazed by the prospect of a future request, you might worry about seeming weak or incompetent if you ask for assistance, especially from someone of higher status. IDEO makes a conscious effort to sweep that hesitation away. From the beginning of every project, designers are encouraged to assume that they'll need help. A project team with a demanding client learns that it would be irresponsible not to ask a colleague who had a lot of experience with that client to review its work. The team members might ask for that colleague's input throughout the project, in sessions lasting anywhere from 15 minutes to half a day. At IDEO there is no shame in asking for help, and this psychological safety shows up on many levels: For example, people cheerfully accept frequent all-office e-mail blasts along the lines of "Does anyone have experience with Spanish-language radio?" or

before they realize "Wow, we completely missed something—which we wouldn't have missed if we had stopped and asked for help."

Most IDEO project teams have one or more senior designers assigned as helpers. These people have expertise in a given domain, deep experience with the team's client, or simply a reputation for being particularly good helpers. They are generally available to the team and check in with it periodically throughout the project.

Slack in the Organization

Remember that helping is a discretionary behavior. That's true even for a formally assigned helper at IDEO: The role is only a small part of anyone's overall job. A potential helper may or may not be able (or willing) to respond to any given request. Because IDEO wants helping to occur, it must avoid overloading people with tasks of their own. Notice the implication: Time that might be spent on billable client work is made available to facilitate ad hoc assistance. This strongly reinforces messages exhorting people to help their colleagues.

The Surprising Omissions

These keys to collaborative help at IDEO may seem uncontroversial. But note what isn't part of the equation: some of corporate leadership's favorite talent-management levers. The firm seems not to rely on fancy collaborative software tools or other technologies (although e-mail and videoconferencing are used frequently). Most pointedly, financial incen-

have experience with Spanish-language radio?” or “Who’s tried the new quick-loss diet?”

Processes & Roles

How pervasive is helping at IDEO? Our network mapping revealed an extraordinary fact: In the office we studied, nearly every person was named as a helper by at least one other person. Even more amazing, an overwhelming majority of employees (about 89%) showed up on at least one other employee’s list of top five helpers. Clearly, effective helping isn’t a rare skill. Most people at IDEO learn to do it as they become steeped in the culture of the organization, participate in its regular activities, and develop networks within the firm. It would be hard, we think, to achieve this simply by communicating the desired culture. And indeed, IDEO goes much further, building the value of help into formal processes and explicit roles.

Help is embedded in the entire design process, from IDEO’s famous brainstorming sessions, through formal design reviews, to the many forms of support and encouragement for project teams seeking feedback on ideas. In this way IDEO builds essential habits of mind. In fact, Brown told us, when help is not seen as an integral part of the process, “teams will rush through their project and get quite close to the end

used frequently). Most pointedly, financial incentives don’t play a prominent role in promoting the culture of help.

To be sure, executives have help in mind when evaluating job candidates. Brown wrote about this recently: “During job interviews, I listen for a couple things. When people repeatedly say ‘I,’ not ‘we,’ when recounting their accomplishments, I get suspicious. But if they’re generous with giving credit and talk about how someone else was instrumental in their progress, I know that they give help as well as receive it.” Helpfulness is considered in promotions as well. It is a value that everyone in a senior position at IDEO is expected to model. But on a daily basis, the incentive to help comes from the simple gratitude it produces and the recognition of its worth.

This apparent joy in collaborative helping speaks to a larger reality of IDEO’s culture: It is not about cutthroat competition. Many organizations discourage helping, at least implicitly, because it is seen as incompatible with individual responsibility for productivity. Some have cultures that actually promote competition among peers, so aiding a colleague seems self-defeating. IDEO’s message is that the thing to beat is the best work you could have done without help—and that when the firm produces the best work possible for clients, all its employees do better.