Now is the Time for Design Leadership

MillerKnoll

30 leading designers,
3 days in NYC, countless
conversations on the future
of the design industry.

The result: passionate design
leaders identifying pressing
issues, developing a plan,
and setting an agenda to
affect change in the industry.

The event juxtaposed moments of inspiration with philosophical debate and brass-tacks reality to uncover opportunities for the future of the design industry. A viewing of Nick Cave's work at the Guggenheim with Naomi Beckwith set the stage for discussions on the creative process and social change. Designers from Knoll Textiles shared the collaboration that translated Cave's art into vibrant textiles. Design leaders from MillerKnoll, Herman Miller, and Knoll shared each brand's vision for the future. Finally, architectural historian and artist Esther Choi challenged design leaders and the industry to place as much investment in social innovation as in material reality.

With this broader perspective in mind, the 2023 Leader to Leader participants broke out into groups to explore tactical implications for their firms and the industry at-large around three specific drivers of change:

Increasing engagement through **participatory design**

Uncovering better insights by leveraging **quality data**

Experimenting with new approaches to work and place design through **pilot projects**

A fourth group explored additional drivers of change that collectively imply a broader **culture shift in the practice and perception of design**. The following is a summary of those conversations and the key areas where we can work together to improve the future of the design industry.

Why it matters

Stability leads to stagnation. Now is the time for progress while we are in an era of flexibility. We believe the best result can be achieved through collaboration. The design industry is ready for change, and we know there are significant opportunities to address for the future including developing a broader, more inclusive perspective; mentoring the newest associates in engaging ways; and preserving time to practice and express the creativity that brought designers to the profession.

Contents

The changing nature of people's relationships—
with each other, the organizations they join, and physical
places—was a central theme of the Participatory Design
session. The session explored nuances of the design
process and how designers are navigating more people
and disciplines, each with varying levels of knowledge,
influence, and engagement—adding new levels of
complexity to an already challenging process.

Participatory design

Key takeaways

1 **Design with, not for.**
Make sure perspectives from the margin count as much as those from the center. Identify and reduce biases and expectations that can potentially cloud findings and decision-making. Find the appropriate balance between making sure all voices are heard and having "too many cooks in the kitchen."

2 **Solicit participation across the organization.**
Design leaders find that it's critical to have representation across the organization. In many cases, they find staff a more reliable source of workflow nuances that impact the design than leadership.

"The manager doesn't know what's in the file cabinets. The CEO has no idea who uses the break room. It's important to have feedback from all levels of staff, not just the leadership."

Carly Herrera, RID IIDA, Principal, BHA Architecture | Interiors
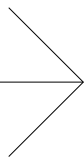
3 **Maintain active communication.**
Keep lines of communication open and nurture trust during the short- and long-term relationships between client, dealer, designer, and manufacturer.

In all cases, strong leadership and change management play a vital role in the success of a participatory design process.

Quality data

Collecting data is one thing, leveraging it for meaningful insight is another. Quantitative data alone—badge swipes, occupancy, utilization metrics—is rarely enough to make effective decisions. It's important to determine the right amount and type of data—including qualitative measures like worker sentiment and engagement—to best inform insights.

Key takeaways

1 **Keep data in its lane.**
Easy access to data is a primary driver of the push for speed, further compressing work into unrealistic timeframes for designers. For senior leadership within design firms, there is concern that young talent is losing the creative part of the design process in favor of data and speed.

2 **Acknowledge quantitative limits.**
Designers identified that quantitative data has a serious shortcoming, it often omits insights into how people want to use spaces. For example, utilization data may be low on specific conference room, but the data doesn't show that the employees don't like using the space because of poor acoustics.

3 **Shift from post-occupancy to proactive planning.**
Typically, only furniture dealer partners are on-site and privy to post-occupancy data due to their long-term project connection. Creating plans to share this data with more project partners could help bolster the value—and impact— of design services, shifting the *day two* mindset from moves, adds, and changes to proactive planning for the future.

"Are they losing their passion for design because everything's about data? We used to have three weeks. Now you have two days for test fits."

Rachel Robinson, IIDA, LEED AP,
Studio Design Principal, Ted Moudis

A piloting approach provides an incredible opportunity to reimagine the workplace through a new lens. Piloting is about experimentation, it provides an opportunity to test, learn, and ultimately scale the implementation of winning strategies. Pilot projects should have specific goals in mind, meaningful connections back to intended outcomes, and clear criteria for measuring success. They are also an excellent way to boost employee engagement while introducing new ways of working in a psychologically safe manner.

Pilot projects

"A pilot is not a mockup, it's not a piece of furniture. I think we can get our clients away from trying to find the right solution right away. We're in this race to find the right answer but it's really that journey that's going to get us to the right solution for each individual client."

– Anne Gibson, Principal, National Practice Leader, Workplace at NELSON Worldwide

Key takeaways

1 **Countdown to launch.**
One area that generated widespread consensus was that the post-pandemic climate is an ideal time to pilot. Clients and their employees are ready to make change. We need to seize the opportunity while we are in an era of flexibility.

"Once we swing back to more stability, interest may dwindle. This is the time to educate clients."

Brett Shwery, FIIDA, CID, AAIA, LEED AP

2 **Keep a beta mindset.**
The most successful pilots are initiated with the intent to refine and scale up. Evaluating, iterating, and capturing learnings are key steps in the process. A beta mindset can be the most valuable tool in the toolbox.

"That rush to get it right the first time can be detrimental. We need to get away from talking about getting the right solution. It's the journey that will get us to the right answer."

Christina Brown, NCIDQ, IIDA, LEED AP, Fitwel Ambassador, Design Principal, geniant+Eastlake Studio

3 **Aim for insightful inertia.**
Clients want to know how their industry peers are approaching their new spaces. Designers challenged MillerKnoll to help them be champions of change by packaging learnings and best practices uncovered through pilot projects that can be shared in ways that protect intellectual property while illustrating the shape of things to come.

Design culture shift

The world has gone through significant changes in how, where, and even why we work. Clients are increasingly operating out of a sense of uncertainty about how to bring employees back to the office, amplifying pressure on designers to get it right. This includes solving for aspects of employee experience that go beyond physical space. Designers are also seeing changes within their own firms, including shifts in the needs of their staff, the way design happens, and how the value of design is perceived by clients.

Designers know that organizational and cultural issues can't be solved with architecture and furniture alone. They also know intentional place design can provide real support for people. They agreed the design of any place should reflect the cultural language of the people it is intended to serve; it should be familiar, so people understand how it meets their needs.

However, they also acknowledged that a good place design creates conditions that help people adapt to new ways of coming together to get things done. Designers see these changes as gradual shifts, rather than a full revolution. By leveraging their expertise in design thinking and problem solving, they articulated an opportunity to help their clients lead by example.

Through creative leadership they can demonstrate the value of design as a dynamic, inclusive, and iterative journey rather than a finite event or a static place.

"Design is a response to social change. No design can exist in isolation. It is always related, sometimes in very complex ways, to an entire constellation of influencing situations and attitudes. What we call a good design is one which achieves integrity–that is, unity or wholeness–in balanced relation to its environment."

– George Nelson

The designers experience

A design firm's people are its most important asset, therefore much of the conversation focused on the pandemic's lasting effect on the talent at firms. Many of the challenges identified correlate with a designer's level of experience. By working through these challenges in their own firms, designers can help shift the focus from a return to the office toward proactively building a better future of work.

Junior designers look for impactful in-person engagement

In-person mentoring and development are keys to junior designers progress. The path of juniors entering the design field exemplifies the culture shift the industry is experiencing. Junior designers were onboarded virtually, and many have worked for months or years without meeting their colleagues in person. In many cases, junior designers continue to work remotely, missing opportunities for in-person mentoring, internal networking, and a sense of belonging.

Leaders are looking for opportunities to engage junior designers in the industry, offer more in-person interactions and training, and elevate skills with clients. Junior designers are looking for opportunities that add mutual value.

"I invite one or two entry-level designers to attend an event with me. They're happy to come. They don't decline the offer and... are so grateful for those experiences and the one-on-one time."
- Melissa Strickland, Principal, HLW

Mid-level designers' path to design leadership

Mid-level designers achieved a work-life balance with a flexible work schedule that did not require five days a week in the office. This created a new challenge within firms who previously relied on this group to bridge between senior leadership and junior designers.

Many design leaders encourage the overall shift toward a better work-life balance and are looking for the best ways to keep designers at all levels connected. However, they're also wary of the toll that changes in the design business have taken on mid-level designers over time—creating anxiety that has led many talented designers to consider other career options.

"Everything has to be done fast. Everything has to be done soon... So how do we come back as leaders, take our situation, and say, 'It takes time to design and be creative.'"
- Rachel Robinson, IIDA, LEED AP, Studio Design Principal, Ted Moudis

Senior leaders need their cups filled

While leaders expressed concern for young, emerging talent and mid-level designers at their firm, they also acknowledge that their cup needs to be filled, too.

"We all came into this field for creativity. We're all creative people."
- Rachel Robinson, IIDA, LEED AP, Studio Design Principal, Ted Moudis

Staying connected to the creative process that inspired them to enter the profession years ago is vital, leaders agreed. The creative and sensory inspiration of Nick Cave will remain with them for some time. The connection and community built at Leader to Leader reminded the participants that industry connections and support at all levels and geographies are important.

Key takeaways

1 **Find opportunities for in-person engagement.**
Junior designers are looking for meaningful in-person opportunities to engage and connect.

**2** **Focus on support and advocacy.**
Mid-level designers need to feel supported in their career and position within their firm.
Design leaders suggest setting boundaries, clarifying true deadlines, and having honest conversations about needing additional time.

3 **Connection to the creative process is key.**
Senior leaders recognize that they need opportunities to engage with their counterparts and to stay close to the craft and find space for creative inspiration.
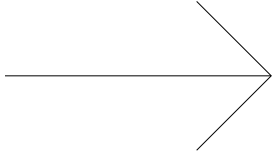
Collaborate or get buried in complexity

As designers brainstormed ways to solve today's challenges a key theme emerged: the best results will be realized through collaboration. In many cases, they proposed solutions that integrate a more communal, shared approach to resources. As an industry we need to come together to share insights and best practices, collectively advocate for the value of design, and work together toward a future that adds the most value for our clients and the broader design industry that serves them.

In an era with more stakeholders, shorter deadlines, and an influx of data, designers expressed concern about their work becoming more commoditized, generating an even greater need to advocate for the true value of design.

Design advocacy requires providing support for design teams and being confident to question clients and leadership in the interest of creating the best results for all. With project teams becoming larger and more complex— at times with competing agendas—

we need to build and maintain trust among all parties involved in a project: client, designer(s), manufacturer, and dealer. Designers have the skills to guide everyone along the way, but the project team needs to take each step together.

The road ahead

Now is the time for...

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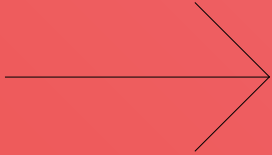
1 **Revolutionary change.**
The world has gone through major shifts and entered an era of flexibility. Now is the time to drive change with our clients, in our industry, and for the practice of design.

2 **Design integrity.**
Allowing time for the creative process, design inspiration, iterative design, and pilot projects can all drive toward integrity in the solutions for clients. It requires communicating true value of the full design process to increasingly value-conscious, speed-driven, and diverse stakeholders.

3 **Adaptive collaboration.**
We need to collaborate to create the best results for our clients and to drive change in the industry. This happens by sharing insights and best practices; advocating for the value of design; and working together toward a future that adds the most value for our clients and design partners.

4 **Transformative leadership.**
From envisioning new futures to prototyping new solutions, leadership from clients, architects and designers, manufacturers, and furniture dealers is needed to solve today's complex challenges.

MillerKnoll would like to thank the design leaders who participated in the inaugural Leader to Leader summit. We look forward to future insightful collaborations.

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