

Creative Confidence

Creative confidence is the notion that you have big ideas, and that you have the ability to act on them.

—David Kelley, Founder, IDEO

Anyone can approach the world like a designer. Often all it takes to unlock that potential as a dynamic problem solver is a bit of creative confidence. Creative confidence is the belief that everyone is creative, and that creativity isn't the capacity to draw or compose or sculpt, but a way of understanding the world.

Creative confidence is the quality that human-centered designers rely on when it comes to making leaps, trusting their intuition, and chasing solutions that they haven't totally figured out yet. It's the belief that you can and will come up with creative solutions to big problems and the confidence that all it takes is rolling up your

sleeves and diving in. Creative confidence will drive you to make things, to test them out, to get it wrong, and to keep on rolling, secure in the knowledge that you'll get where you need to go and that you're bound to innovate along the way.

It can take time to build creative confidence, and part of getting there is trusting that the human-centered design process will show you how to bring a creative approach to whatever problem is at hand. As you start with small successes and then build to bigger ones, you'll see your creative confidence grow and before long you'll find yourself in the mindset that you are a wildly creative person.

Make It

You're taking risk out
of the process by making
something simple first.
And you always learn
lessons from it.

—Krista Donaldson, CEO, D-Rev

As human-centered designers, we make because we believe in the power of tangibility. **And we know that making an idea real reveals so much that mere theory cannot.** When the goal is to get impactful solutions out into the world, you can't live in abstractions. You have to make them real.

Human-centered designers are doers, tinkers, crafters, and builders. We make using anything at our disposal, from cardboard and scissors to sophisticated digital **tools. We build our ideas so that we can test them,** and because actually making something reveals opportunities and complexities that we'd never have guessed were there. Making is also a fantastic way to think, and it helps bring into focus the feasibility of our designs. Moreover, making an idea real is an incredibly effective way to share it. And without candid, actionable feedback from people, we won't know how to push our ideas forward.

As you move through the human-centered design process, it doesn't matter what you make, the materials you use, or how beautiful the result is, the goal is always to convey an idea, share it, and learn how to make it better.

Best of all, you can prototype anything at any stage of the process from a service model to a uniform, from a storyboard to the financial details of your solution. As human-centered designers, we have a bias toward action, and that means getting ideas out of our heads and into the hands of the people we're looking to serve.

Learn from Failure

Don't think of it as failure,
think of it as designing
experiments through which
you're going to learn.

—Tim Brown, CEO, IDEO

Failure is an incredibly powerful tool for learning. Designing experiments, prototypes, and interactions and testing them is at the heart of human-centered design. So is an understanding that not all of them are going to work. As we seek to solve big problems, we're bound to fail. But if we adopt the right mindset, we'll inevitably learn something from that failure.

Human-centered design starts from a place of not knowing what the solution to a given design challenge might be. Only by listening, thinking, building, and refining our way to an answer do we get something that will work for the people we're trying to serve. "Fail early to succeed sooner" is a common refrain around IDEO, and part of its power is the permission it gives to get something wrong. By refusing to take risks, some problem solvers actually close themselves off from a real chance to innovate.

Thomas Edison put it well when he said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." And for human-centered designers, sorting out what won't work is part of finding what will.

Failure is an inherent part of human-centered design because we rarely get it right on our first try. In fact, getting it right on the first try isn't the point at all. The point is to put something out into the world and then use it to keep learning, keep asking, and keep testing. When human-centered designers get it right, it's because they got it wrong first.

Empathy

In order to get to new solutions, you have to get to know different people, different scenarios, different places.

—Emi Kolawole, Editor-in-Residence,
Stanford University d.school

Empathy is the capacity to step into other people's shoes, to understand their lives, and start to solve problems from their perspectives. Human-centered design is premised on empathy, on the idea that the people you're designing for are your roadmap to innovative solutions. All you have to do is empathize, understand them, and bring them along with you in the design process.

For too long, the international development community has designed solutions to the challenges of poverty without truly empathizing with and understanding the people it's looking to serve. But by putting ourselves in the shoes of the person we're designing for, human-centered designers can start to see the world, and all the opportunities to improve it, through a new and powerful lens.

Immersing yourself in another world not only opens you up to new creative possibilities, but it allows you to leave behind preconceived ideas and outmoded ways of thinking. Empathizing with the people you're designing for is the best route to truly grasping the context and complexities of their lives. But most importantly, it keeps the people you're designing for squarely grounded in the center of your work.

Embrace Ambiguity

We want to give ourselves
the permission to explore
lots of different possibilities
so that the right answer
can reveal itself.

—Patrice Martin, Co-Lead and Creative Director,
IDEO.org

Human-centered designers always start from the place of not knowing the answer to the problem they're looking to solve. And in a culture that can be too focused on being the first one to the right answer, that's not a particularly comfortable place to be. But by starting at square one, we're forced to get out into the world and talk to the people we're looking to serve. We also get to open up creatively, to pursue lots of different ideas, and to arrive at unexpected solutions. By embracing that ambiguity, and by trusting that the human-centered design process will guide us toward an innovative answer, we actually give ourselves permission to be fantastically creative.

One of the qualities that sets human-centered designers apart is the belief that there will always be more ideas. We don't cling to ideas any longer than we have to because we know that we'll have more. Because human-centered design is such

a generative process, and because we work so collaboratively, it's easy to discard bad ideas, hold onto pieces of the so-so ones, and eventually arrive at the good ones.

Though it may seem counterintuitive, the ambiguity of not knowing the answer actually sets up human-centered designers to innovate.

If we knew the answer when we started, what could we possibly learn? How could we come up with creative solutions? Where would the people we're designing for guide us? Embracing ambiguity actually frees us to pursue an answer that we can't initially imagine, which puts us on the path to routine innovation and lasting impact.

Optimism

Optimism is the thing
that drives you forward.

—John Bielenberg, Founder, Future Partners



We believe that design is inherently optimistic. To take on a big challenge, especially one as large and intractable as poverty, we have to believe that progress is even an option. If we didn't, we wouldn't even try. Optimism is the embrace of possibility, the idea that even if we don't know the answer, that it's out there and that we can find it.

In addition to driving us toward solutions, optimism makes us more creative, encourages us to push on when we hit dead ends, and helps all the stakeholders in a project gel. Approaching problems from the perspective that you'll get to a solution infuses the entire process with the energy and drive that you need to navigate the thorniest problems.

Human-centered designers are persistently focused on what could be, not the countless obstacles that may get in the way. Constraints are inevitable, and often they push designers toward unexpected solutions. But it's our core animating belief—that every problem is solvable—that shows just how deeply optimistic human-centered designers are.

Iterate, Iterate, Iterate

By iterating, we validate our ideas along the way because we're hearing from the people we're actually designing for.

—Gaby Brink, Founder, Tomorrow Partners

As human-centered designers, we adopt an iterative approach to solving problems because it makes feedback from the people we're designing for a critical part of how a solution evolves. By continually iterating, refining, and improving our work, we put ourselves in a place where we'll have more ideas, try a variety of approaches, unlock our creativity, and arrive more quickly at successful solutions.

Iteration keeps us nimble, responsive, and trains our focus on getting the idea and, after a few passes, every detail just right. If you aimed for perfection each time you built a prototype or shared an idea, you'd spend ages refining something whose validity was still in doubt. But by building, testing, and iterating, you can advance your idea without investing hours and resources until you're sure that it's the one.

At base, we iterate because we know that we won't get it right the first time. Or even the second. Iteration allows us the opportunity to explore, to get it wrong, to follow our hunches, but ultimately arrive at a solution that will be adopted and embraced. We iterate because it allows us to keep learning. Instead of hiding out in our workshops, betting that an idea, product, or service will be a hit, we quickly get out in the world and let the people we're designing for be our guides.