



Episode 79
Leadership Tips for Design
Businesses



**Jason: (00:00)**

Hello and welcome to designer discussions with Jason, Mirjam and Maria. Today we are talking about leadership tips for design businesses.

Intro: [00:10]

Welcome to the designer discussions podcast with Jason, Maria, and Mirjam. Tune in each week where we talk about marketing, PR, and business advice for design professionals. Are you wondering where to start marketing your interior design business? We are opening the Designer Discussions Marketing Studio, a monthly series of indepth actionable content to guide your marketing, PR and business development. We want to help you transform your business and elevate it to work with your dream clients. You are going to want to hear this episode. Jason is going to tell you how to get your new website paid for and include all the bells and whistles that you're going to need for 2023. Let's get out there and let's update that interior design website.

Jason: (00:47)

Today we are joined by Erika Weed and she is a professional in the leadership training basin. So I wanted to have her on to talk about leadership tips because as a designer, myself and Maria can also attest to this. We learn a lot about the design industry, but when we want to run a business, we don't learn a lot about leadership and the effect that that can have on the design business. So that's why we want to have Erika here today. How are you doing today, Erika?

Erika: (01:11)

I'm doing great this morning and I just want to tell you, I have an MBA and I got taught very little about running about the leadership process in business as well. So don't feel bad, this is not unusual.

Jason: (01:31)

Well, that's good to know. So I wanted to have you here because we had a conversation last year and it was a dynamic conversation and we talked about leadership and hiring process and how you can interact with your employees and how they can make or break a business from all of that. I had talked to Maria, Mirjam, I said we need to have her on just to talk because I know a lot of our designers that are business owners. Whether you're a one man shop, whether you have a few employees, or whether you have a vast organization, leadership is at the core of helping to run a successful business. And so that's why I want to have you here. So if you could tell us just a little bit about who you are.

**Erika: (02:11)**

So, my name is Erika Weed. I am an organizational development consultant. I work with organizations on topics of leadership, group and team dynamics, organizational development systems, talent systems and so right now my company is growing and changing. Just like I'm sure many in the design industry. There's been a very large shift since COVID and we are working to shift and change with our industry as well. So it's great to be here and talk to you guys about what's important in your industry.

Jason: (02:31)

So, talking holistically about leadership, what are some tips that you've seen in terms of leadership that are tried and true that apply to almost every industry that every leader should have?

Erika: (02:59)

I think it's really important to start off with what we mean by leadership and I will make it very simple. Leadership is engaging in a relationship with the people around you. We talk about leaders, and I think a lot of times leader is sort of a placeholder for a person in a position of power and authority. And when we talk about leadership, we're really not talking about positional leadership. We're not talking about power and authority, the ability to tell people what to do. When we talk about leadership, we talk about the ability to cultivate a relationship with the people around you, not just with employees, but with shareholders in your organization, with people that you're partnering with, with others in the design industry around you. And it's the ability to cultivate those relationships in order to bring resources towards your organization. So that's the number one thing that I like to caution people is don't think about leadership as a position or a person with authority. Think about it as the ability to cultivate relationships around you. And so that kind of brings us to the next point, which is having a good leadership style depends on the people that you're going to have around you.

**Erika: (04:11)**

It's one of the reasons why in organizational development we focus not just on leadership, we focus on followership, on teams. It's one of the reasons why the hiring process is brought into organizational development and leadership development. Because we want to make sure that we are creating groups of people that are going to be effective, that we're allowing for leadership in a variety of different types of organizations, for a variety of different contexts, for a lot of different situations. We want to be mindful of all those key details when we're developing leadership strategies. And I think the next thing that you got to think about is what is your leadership strategy? What are you striving to do? Are you striving to make your business more efficient? Are you looking to grow your business? Are you looking to create interdependencies with the businesses around you? I think that's a really good strategy right now, especially with as many small companies as we see starting. And so really being clear on what your leadership goals are is a huge part of designing an effective leadership strategy for your organization. Those are maybe the three main things I would think about.

Jason: (05:31)

Okay, so on the opposite end, since you deal with a lot of leadership training from business owners, what have you seen as the things to watch out for that you see typically in leaders, that they do over and over again, that they need to either stop because it will, at the end of the day, have a negative effect on their business.

Erika: (05:49)

I think when we're talking about the main things that leaders do that have a negative impact on their business, I think what we really have to look at is over controlling. I think for a lot of organizations I started my company with just me, and it was really easy to get along with just me. I didn't have to ask me anything about my decisions and I didn't have to get my permission for anything. And when it was me, it was much easier when I brought on a partner. When I started working with other organizations, I had more complexity in my leadership goals. And so I needed to be able to kind of shift away from just pleasing myself and doing what I wanted to do and opening myself up to more opportunities, more options, more complexity and the needs of the people around me. And I think what I see in a lot of organizations, small organizations or newer organizations, is that it can be hard for leaders to shift away from just me into there are greater needs, there are other needs, there's more complexity. I need to be more open to all those variables and more able to adjust to the needs of those variables.

**Jason: (07:11)**

I love that because you said that, right? Because when we began we had our own architecture firm and it was just the partners, it was just us. And so we knew how we had a great work ethic and we knew how to handle everything. But once we started to hire employees and we had to deal with other people's work ethic or they don't have the passion that the owners have, obviously, because they're just in it for a whole different reason that the owners are in it. So how do you advise owners with that transition? Because I know that was a big transition for me once we actually had employees to have to relate to them on a different level and mindset in terms of the end goal. So tell us new about that.

Erika: (08:09)

I would say if you're an owner and you are either scaling up your business or your business model is changing or you find yourself in the midst of a new group around you, I would say the most important thing for you to do is learn how to listen. And that can be really challenging because to be a successful business owner, you really have to be an expert in your field. Right? That's one of the major selling points to your clients is that you know what you're doing. You've done a lot of different things before. You have tons of experience that makes your clients feel really good. But as a leader, it is super important to be able to step away from your expertise and the gravitas that you may hold in the industry and again, be able to listen to the people around you. There are a lot of different anecdotes that I can tell you about leaders who were very sure and very clear about what they wanted to do and the direction that they wanted to follow all the way up until that direction wasn't going to help them anymore. The industry had changed, the market had changed. Other complicating variables had changed. And the successful leaders are the ones who were able to listen to the people around them who are saying maybe we should think about this, maybe we should try that. Being able to adjust to the different needs of the people in your organization, that kind of resilience is really important when it comes to being a leader. You can't know it all, but you can surround yourself with the kind of people who are going to be able to tell you about it all. And I think that being a successful leader in your organization means being able to hear that from others, even if it doesn't necessarily go with what you thought was going to be happening.

**Jason: (09:11)**

Okay? And then in terms of when you have employees, not even employees, even when you have contract workers, because a lot of designers may not have employees per se, they just may have contract workers that they work with. But it's about motivation, helping to get the most out of them, the creativity and all that. How do you advise leaders on how to motivate help your employees, contractors, be creative to get the most out of it?

Erika: (10:09)

Go for the win win. Look for the win win. I am not the greatest fan of Steven Covey's work, but one of his Ten Habits of Highly Successful People, seven Habits of Highly Successful People is to find the win win. I think that for most people, not all, but the vast majority of people, they are looking for the ability to be successful without having to make somebody else around them unsuccessful. And I think that you as the business owner can appeal to that kind of rational self interest by finding situations where you're not trying to take advantage of other people, you're not trying to withhold information from other people. You can come at situations with a degree of openness and transparency and dare I say, maybe even vulnerability and really make the case for the win win to your clients and to your contractors, to your employees. Being able to build trust and value in that relationship in that way, I think that's a huge benefit for leaders and it doesn't require you to be self sacrificing. It doesn't require you to hurt yourself. Small business owners, I am a big proponent of never doing free work, always making sure that you're charging market rate.

Jason: (11:47)

Can you say that one more time? Never do free work.

Erika: (11:52)

You can put it in subtitles right below me. No free work. I don't care how important that client says they are. I don't care what kind of argument they make for how much they're going to get you in social media views or whatever, whatever they're offering you. Do not do free work. But there are other things that you can do to make sure that you're creating a win win environment for everybody around you. And I think that naturally builds the kind of trust that a good relationship needs to be built on.

**Jason: (12:11)**

One of the only classes I had is food that I use all the time is conflict resolution. I use that almost every day. There are some where there is talking to contractors, employees, clients, my partner, my kids. No matter. Conflict resolution is just an aspect. And when you're working with others, whether it be your own employees, your own contractors, or your clients, conflict will happen. So when you're talking to leaders in your trainings about handling conflict, what is your advice in those areas?

Erika: (12:59)

First of all, I want to say yes, I 100% agree with you. Conflict is going to happen. Okay? I meet a lot of leaders who are naturally a little conflict avoidance. We all have our different kind of threshold tolerance level for conflict. And some of us seek out conflict very naturally. I would put myself in that category, quite frankly. But whether you like conflict or don't like conflict, everybody needs to get to the place where you're able to resolve it. And so I have a three step process sorry, this is going to sound very kind of management consulting, but I do have a three step process for being able to manage conflict effectively and resolve it. So the first step in the process is number one, explain to the person that you are having conflict with what you see is going on in that situation. All right? Take some time to yourself before you have this meeting, but really kind of think for yourself what you think is really going on in this situation. Then when you sit down with the person that you're having conflict with, explain how you see it and then allow them to explain back to you how they see it. Try to find some common ground. All right? That's step one. Step two is describing what your ideal resolution for this conflict would be. What are the things that you would like to see happen in order for this conflict to be resolved? And then ask the person to again give you the same back so that you can both relate, find some common ground, maybe even potentially figure out where you guys can work together to kind of resolve this conflict. The third thing, and this is the most important piece, is being able to explain the consequences that you see if this conflict is not resolved. These are consequences that you can control. Okay? So if you don't employ this person, don't expect the consequence to be for them to be fired. All right? But the things that you can control, what are the boundaries that you want to set up and put into place? What are the repercussions of the decisions that somebody is going to make if they don't kind of meet those expectations that you guys have mutually agreed upon? What can you do to successfully kind of manage yourselves if those expectations aren't met, and then allow them to recognize it.

**Erika: (15:29)**

So being clear about what you see is going on in the situation, being clear about what you expect to go on in this situation, and then being clear about what happens if those expectations are not met. After you finish those three pieces, you guys should both be very clear on what is going on, what we would like to see happen to resolve this situation and what are the consequences if it's not. And at that point, everybody is a grown up in that room. Everybody gets to make their own decisions, but everybody's clear on all the information. Those are the three things that I do to successfully manage conflicts. These are the things that I tell my clients to do to successfully manage conflict. These are the things that people in your industry can do to successfully manage conflict.

Maria: (16:16)

So even as an individual designer, we are the leader in our client relationships, right? We still have to have leadership and ownership over our role as the design professional on the project. And we might be working with the builder, the client, people who are on the construction site. I have salespeople, I have full entire business teams and investors that I have to manage when I work on a project. Even as a solo preneur. So even as solopreneurs, all of this applies to how we should be doing client management as well. And these are communication skills that we can all improve every day to make those client relationships better.

Erika: (17:06)

100%. And honestly, I talk to leaders and professionals in all kinds of industries. I tell people that my work is industry independent because everybody's having these same challenges, right? These steps can work for anyone.

Jason: (17:22)

So, talking about relationships, what a lot of owners are after is to build strong teams. What advice would you have to owners to help build a strong team that can have them have a successful business?



Erika: (17:29)

Okay, so there are five things and I'm going to do my very best to remember these five things off the top of my head very quickly. So first, trust. We were talking a little bit about how can we build strong leader relationships. And I think that having a win win mentality, being open and upfront with your communication goes a long way to building trust. So your team has to trust you. That means that you need to be acting in a way that is trustworthy. So when we talk to leaders, oftentimes I'll find leaders who are saying, well, nobody on my team is trustworthy. I can't get them to do what they say, I can't get them to be where they say they're going to be, I just can't trust them. And a lot of times that comes from the fact that the leader has modeled kind of an untrustworthy leadership style. They haven't put faith in the people around them to get the job done. They've micromanaged, they've over controlled, they gave the impression that their team wasn't trustworthy and their team stopped working to be trustworthy because what's the point? You do everything right and you still get criticized. So building trust in your team, having your team trust you, takes being a trustworthy leader. Putting your trust in other people communication. We've talked about managing conflicts successfully comes down to being able to successfully communicate important pieces of information to those around you. And I think that communication goes a long way towards building successful teams. People have the information that they need to make the best choice. And if your team is telling you, well, I didn't know that or I wasn't expecting that or you never mentioned that to me, that's a way for you to kind of recognize and listen to the fact that they feel like they don't have adequate communication. Also making sure that they can communicate with each other, don't gatekeep things from each other, don't expect your team to gatekeep with amongst themselves. Building successful communication strategies again comes back to it being a mutual relationship. Here purpose is another one that's super important to teams. Being able to show the people that you're working with where you're trying to go. You wouldn't walk into a design engagement and not show your clients pictures of the final product before they okay you to come in and work in their homes. That would be crazy. Why would anybody do that? Showing your team the final product, the vision that you have for your team's relationship, for your organization goes a long way to being able to free them up to kind of help you with that. And the conflict management strategy is super important as well. When we're talking about being able to handle the bumps in the road that you're going to hit, there is no avoiding them. So we want to be able to have a strategy in place for that. I think that's only four and honestly I can't remember the fifth one. We'll have to come back and do a part two on this one because there is a fifth one and off the top of my head I can't remember it and I don't want to go searching for it right now.

**Jason: (20:50)**

No, that's fine. When we had talked last year about you're in graduate school now I want you to tell our listeners about what you're doing your dissertation on and why. Because I count. That very interesting.

Erika: (21:02)

So my degree is actually not a PhD. It is an ed. It's a Doctorate of education. I am doing my dissertation now. I'm a doctoral candidate and my dissertation topic is Narcissistic Leadership in Times of Chaotic Change. So I picked that topic because, well number one, it was previously for a couple of years ago. It was a pretty under researched topic. It was a pretty under researched kind of discussion that people weren't really looking at it very clearly and then for some reason it blew up and there were lots of people I know. I can't figure out why either. For some reason, there were a lot of people who were really interested in narcissism. But what I started to notice was that the topic was almost always universally that narcissism in leadership was bad and should be avoided at all costs and that organizations should never have to deal with these leaders. And that was sort of the end of the story. I think we all know that in practice that actually isn't what happens. That I think in practice in organizations, we all come across people who are higher in Narcissism than what we are comfortable with. And so my question is why? If everyone in the academic area of leadership is saying, well, this is bad and it's terrible for organizations, then how come organizations hire those individuals? How come organizations put up with the things that leaders who are higher in Narcissism do and the consequences that that has for organizations? Why is that acceptable? And I have a theory, but it has not been proven yet. So you guys can stay tuned for the conclusion of that exciting episode. But I think it's really a conversation worth having because it's something that has real consequences for people in organizations. And my whole job as a leadership development professional is to ask the questions that are going to bring answers to people in organizations that are going to make their lives easier, make their teams stronger, make their organizations more resilient.

Jason: (23:30)

I love that. And we are going to have to have you back to see what happened if your theory was actually proven out from what that's all ironed out.

Erika: (23:40)

We shall see. Stay tuned.

**Mirjam: (23:40)**

It just crossed my mind, like, have you ever coached a narcissist in a leadership position? That must be interesting.

Erika: (23:51)

I have worked with individuals who are higher in narcissism. I think that it is less interesting than people might believe. I think that the root of it's. Not that I think we know that the root of narcissism is just intense insecurity. It is an over. It's an over application of strength to mask what is just pure unadulterated shame and insecurity. And once you see that, and once you've really experienced that, it gets a lot easier to deal with people's bad behavior because it's not personal to you anymore. It really kind of lifts the weight off of your shoulders to say, oh, that's about me. I'm responsible for that. That's my fault. Which is kind of what they want you to feel. And you really have the freedom to say, okay, that's a you problem today, and I'm going to need you to have that problem today. That's not going to be my problem today. Which is a very liberating place, to be quite frankly. This works with people.

Maria: (25:00)

This works with your family, this works with your working team, this works with your clients. Because I think what happens is as designers, we think we have to treat our design clients differently than we need to treat our work people. And I think when Jason was talking about this, he was like, what about your team building, your business, your team, these big firms, blah, blah, blah. And I'm like, dude, it's the same, it's the freaking thing. Your leadership skills in your office are going to be the same leadership skills that they're good, that are going to help you with your clients, that will make you a better person with a design client.

Erika: (25:40)

Imagine how your team would be if you treated your team as well as you treat your design clients. Imagine.

Mirjam: (26:01)

I was just looking at your website while we were talking to it. I'm like, there's a lot of humanity woven through all of it. Which in my however, 20 plus years of corporate was not always like that with the organizational development people, let's just.

**Erika: (26:11)**

Put it that way, that was called HR. And HR, ironically, does not always cater to the human needs. No, they really don't relate. And so one of the reasons why OD exists is because somebody said, hey, this isn't how people are, this isn't how people work. And so my job, and particularly the reason why I chose the program that I chose to get my doctorate, and the reason why it's not a PhD is because I didn't think that I wanted to be in academia. I didn't want to be a teacher or professor writing research papers for AACSB accreditation when I could be in organizations actually putting the theory to practice. And I think that one of the things that's happened over the last I mean, it's been happening since OD was created, but I think over the last few years for sure, and especially since COVID we started to realize that, stop treating people like they're supposed to be robots or machines. Come on, you guys know better. There is no reason to take the humanity away from somebody just because they're working. And so what you're seeing is a real resurgence of understanding the way that people operate. That's one of the reasons why I use personality assessment in my practice. It's one of the reasons why I use mode of need assessment in my practice. I want to know who you are at like, a neurological level so that I can help you to structure your work, so that it suits your personality, so that suits your motive need, so that it really develops you as a person. And we can do that at a team level, and oh, by the way, we can also do that at an organizational level. And once you accept the humanity of people and design the systems to work with that humanity, not against it, you actually start taking advantage of a lot of the efficiencies that are around you. You get that. Well, you guys will get this. The Gestalt becomes even more important there because you're really taking advantage of that exponential kind of development in your organization, and it makes it so much better for the people around you.

Mirjam: (28:30)

It makes complete sense to me. It's not what I see in a lot of organizations that I work with, sadly.

Erika: (28:40)

And 100%, we're behind. All right? We are behind. The industry is behind. Academia has not done a great job of catching people up. We're not talking about this enough. And you know what? There's also a lot of misinformation in this market. I have met many people who call themselves a coach, who call themselves a consultant, who don't necessarily have the background or the tools that they need to do this work really well. Every time one of you meets somebody who's on Instagram and calls themselves a designer and goes and poaches one of your clients, it feels bad. But then that calls, client comes back and says, they didn't do what I thought they would do it. They didn't do it up to your standards. So there's some professionalism that needs to be more it needs to be more robust in my industry. But I think that's true for just about anybody, probably.

**Maria: (33:05)**

Yeah, exactly. It's just really interesting. I don't know, I just found all of this research and stuff to be so interesting.

Jason: (33:14)

As we close out from all of the training that you've done with leaders, what have you seen? And we hear articles all the time about these are the traits of the top leaders that you must have these things. What have you seen from your own training and your own interactions with leaders that are the tip that they have in common of the successful leaders that you've dealt with in the past?

Erika: (33:48)

It's so funny because I think that question is the number one question that I get every single day from every single person that I talk to. And I think people are looking for traits. They're looking for traits or skills or behaviors, stuff you can do that makes you a really good leader. And I've got some good news and I've got some bad news. The good news is that in my experience anybody can and is a leader. We talked about leadership not being a positional thing. The best leaders are the ones who can most effectively maneuver the people who are following them. Who can most effectively lead the people who are following them. Do they have buy in from the people around them? Are they somebody that others will listen to? Do they successfully take people on that journey to the end point? I think that's really all we can use to define good leadership. And so the good news is that anybody can do that. It's going to depend on the group that you're in. It's going to depend on the context around you. It's going to depend on how you're feeling on any given day. But anybody can be a good leader. The bad news is that you can't just pick up a list of skills and check those boxes. You can't rely on certain personality traits to do it every time. A lot of people 100 years ago thought that the best type of leader was a tall white man with a good head of hair and an extroverted personality. And that worked pretty well in certain cases. But quite frankly, we've discovered that that is not the be all and end all leadership. And so while you can anybody can be an excellent leader, I think the most important thing is to know who you are, number one, and be able to translate who you are into an authentic leadership style. And that comes at the very high cost of learning a lot about yourself, not just the good things, but also kind of some of the bad things as well. In fact, all of the bad things and being able to be comfortable with that, being able to accept your strengths and your limitations, being able to know all the things that you know, but also being able to say, I don't know the answer to that question.

**Erika: (36:48)**

But I do have somebody very smart who's going to help me figure it out. Having that the confidence of knowing your true and authentic self is such a huge part of leadership and it is something that is learned and developed over long periods of intense introspection. Not necessarily time, but for sure, long periods of intense introspection. And so while I encourage everyone to find the space where they are going to be able to engage in a leadership relationship with others, I can also recognize that having the time, a way to work on yourself, develop yourself, get to know yourself, is a huge and important commitment for anybody who wants to be a leader.

Jason: (37:16)

I love it. Erika so if anyone in our audience wants to contact you, how do they do?

Erika: (37:21)

So you can find me at my company website, which is www.ascendry.com. You can shoot me a message, send me an email. We've got the LinkedIn, we've got the Facebook, that's probably the only social media that one. But yeah, you can find me online and you can also I work with a lot of other consultants who do other types of development work, group and team development work. There's a ton of different types of development, coaching, consulting that you can find out there in the world. Lots of really talented people doing lots of really interesting things. And if you have a specific question about your organization, your type of leadership, your personality, if I don't know the answer, I bet you I know somebody who does. So I am happy to answer questions. I'm happy to have people reach out and ask me what's going on and if there's anything that I can do to help.

Jason: (38:25)

We appreciate your time, Erica, and we know everyone in our audience has enjoyed learning just a little bit more about how to be an effective leader. So we hope to hear you all and see you all here next week on Designer Discussions.

Outro: (38:39)

Are you ready to get serious about marketing your interior design business? Our Designer Discussions Marketing Studio offers a series of in depth actionable and done for you content to guide your marketing, PR and business development. We want to help you transform your business and elevate it to work with your dream clients. Go to DesignerDiscussions.com marketing studio to get started. We hope you enjoyed this episode of Designer Discussions and all of the helpful information. Subscribe to our podcast, leave us a review and share it with your friends. We look forward to having you back next week. For more information on the podcast and the Marketing Studio, visit DesignerDiscussions.com and follow us on social media.

**Mirjam: (29:50)**

So, yeah, I agree.

Maria: (29:55)

The audio book that I listened to recently, and unfortunately the last chapter turns into sales, but it was called *The Mountain is Me*. I don't know if you've seen it yet, but when you read it, I audio booked it right when I was audio booking it. They were just like, look, these are everybody's problems. And it either shows up as a financial problem or it shows up as a relationship problem. And once you figure out how to fix those problems in your relationships, then it will show up in your financial, but you can fix it in the financial department. And then when it doesn't move on to there, you'll find it located in your life in the same way. And they're like, you can basically overlay, like someone who's having a relationship problem with someone who's having a financial problem. They're all facing the exact same problems. They can ask the same questions and get to their better solution through those things. And it's super interesting to realize that business is just another lens for us to learn about ourselves, and we learn about ourselves. And our failings and work are the same failings we have at home, and they're the same failings we're going to have in other areas of our life. But that book was really interesting to read because I hadn't had anyone overlay so accurately. That if you have a really strong self belief that you're going to be successful and you're going to be financially stable and everything is going to work out for you in the long run, that those people are financially stable and they are doing well in the long run. And then the people who are sitting around that don't have that thought and that belief. Are the ones that are struggling. It's so wild to just see how they can it's the same person but it's like I don't know, that's like columns I guess we have that we.

Erika: (31:48)

Don't realize that we have that we're working on. Absolutely. I call myself a leadership development consultant. I call myself an executive coach. But the challenges that my clients are facing at work are the same exact challenges that they're facing at home. And so when you talk about my website and how it's got a very kind of human we're incorporating all the human characteristics. The reason for that is because you really can't separate and you really shouldn't try. You shouldn't be two different people, one at home and one at work. That's not sustainable. And it's one of the reasons why change is so hard. Because if you change something at work it will change your whole life. If you change something in your relationship it's going to have an impact on your whole life. And so if you're trying to quit doing something here but continue to do it someplace else, well that's not sustainable change.



DESIGNER DISCUSSIONS

DIGITAL MARKETING,
PR & BUSINESS
DEVELOPMENT

