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Design Thinking in Action: Changing the Public Service Model

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STEPHANIE CHASE

Stephanie is Director of the Hillsboro (OR) Public Library. Prior to Hillsboro, Stephanie coordinated service strategies to libraries for BiblioCommons and was the Director of Library Programs and Services for The Seattle Public Library. Stephanie is the founder of the Green Mountain (VT) Library Consortium, a 2010 *Library Journal* Mover & Shaker, and a founding member and current chair of the LibraryReads Steering Committee.

While the concept of design thinking is not new, in the past several years, it has emerged as a concept of interest for libraries, placed firmly in our sights through a high-profile collaboration between the Chicago Public Library and DOKK1 in Aarhus, Denmark, supported by the Gates Foundation.

Design thinking—or human-centered design, as it is also known—is most closely associated with design consultancy firm IDEO, and is simply a method of creative problem solving that starts with reaching a goal, rather than a solving a problem, in mind.

Stanford's d.school is also an active participant in the design thinking space; in an article about Stanford's work, student Karen Ladenheim described it as “a tangible scaffolding through which [one] can approach problem solving,” and using the example of redesigning scissors to illustrate:

“If I told you to design a better pair of scissors, you would immediately think of something with a handle and two blades that fit into your hand ... [b]ut if I told you instead to find a better way to cut paper, then maybe you would imagine something that was larger and with only a single blade, or something that rips paper, or something more similar to a hole punch.”

The design thinking process is generally considered to have seven steps, which were first proposed in Herbert Simon's 1969 book *The Sciences of the Artificial*:

1. Define
2. Research



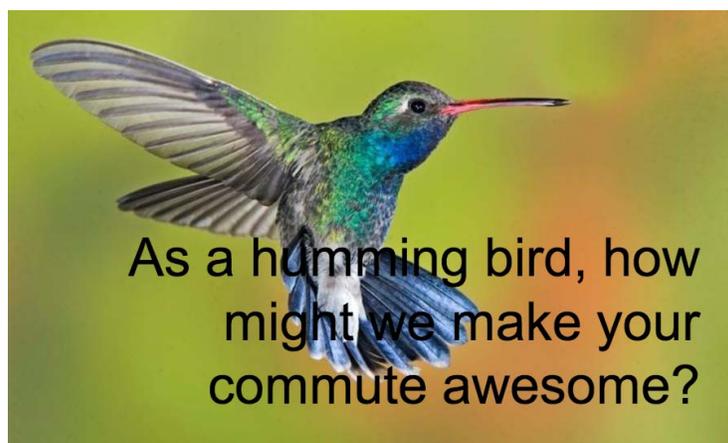
3. Ideate
4. Prototype
5. Choose
6. Implement
7. Learn

Moving through these seven steps, a team is encouraged to think broadly and creatively of ways to reach a goal. For the Hillsboro Public Library, our intention was to use this process to develop a new collaborative and patron-focused service model. In Hillsboro, we knew we wanted to reduce service points and make it easier for patrons to get the help they needed in whatever form they preferred. We also knew that we needed to be clearer about the roles of our Library Assistants and our Librarians, and to find ways for the staff to work together, rather than be siloed. Rather than thinking about our current service model as a problem that needed to be fixed, we wanted to explore ways to improve the patron experience and bring more value to staff.

At Hillsboro, we enlisted a variety of staff to take part in this brainstorm, drawing from our Strategic Initiatives division (essentially our “R&D” department) and our newly formed Innovation Team. The Innovation Team is one of Hillsboro’s staff-led teams, a committee type that consists of five to seven staff from across all classifications and which is self-led, with only a management sponsor (as opposed to a manager in a leadership role), who serves to clear roadblocks, obtain resources, and ensure the activities of the team consistently align with organizational and municipal goals and initiatives.

Our Innovation Team acts as our process improvement crew, and we knew the design thinking process would be an important one to have in their toolbox. We contracted with Dri Ralph, a facilitator from the Seattle area familiar with libraries and who has experience with Six Sigma and the design thinking process. Dri led the participating staff in an all-day session, using the IDEO Toolkit developed for libraries as a guide.

We began the day moving quickly through the seven steps, using the Toolkit to brainstorm in small groups the ideal commute for a variety of animals, including a hummingbird. It may sound fanciful, but it was a perfect way to get participants thinking creatively about a problem as well as holistically about the user—in this case, a tiny, fast bird that needs a lot of fuel.



Courtesy Dri Ralph



Following this opening exercise, we moved on to the main charge of the day, which was to move through the design thinking process with this question in mind:

- How might we create a collaborative service model on the first floor of the Brookwood Library?

We spent the day refining our understanding of the issues, in order to really define the goal we were working towards. We did this through a variety of exercises, exploring our current barriers. Barriers included:

- a large number of reference and informational questions that end up at our coffee court, as the staff there are the most immediately visible upon entering the Brookwood Library location;
- the challenge of the desk configuration at our Shute Park Library location;
- and the main service point being to the left, rather than the right, at Brookwood and additional service points hidden from view.

We undertook research before the design thinking day to help inform our work; this is how we learned about the questions going to the coffee court. During the day, we also moved through some or all of the seven steps as interesting solutions arose, researching in real time by observing in the Brookwood Library patron behavior around the coffee court, ideating around how to solve the barriers to access created by the physical layout of the lobby, prototyping using Duplos for new lobby layouts, and choosing from the prototype ideas which one we were going to move forward, which now sits as a developed plan from our architect, ready to implement when the time is right.



Courtesy Dri Ralph



how much time they had to spend on meeting their information need changed (for example, that they had the time and desire to chat with staff, or that they were in a rush). Staff for each round stayed the same, dressed in black with obvious name tags.

What we learned is that people, in general, were very satisfied with the library, because they had developed their own patterns of usage. However, satisfaction dipped considerably when they had to adopt new needs and new personas, a much more accurate and useful representation of the average user experience. We learned that patrons did not know where to go to ask questions or find high-use collections, and that our options for self-service were hidden. We learned patrons want to do more for themselves, but also very much appreciated easily and clearly seeing how to access staff if they have a question. We also learned that very hands-on, concierge style service—the Apple Store model—was confusing to people, who are perhaps used to the self-education model of public libraries.

As a result of the prototyping day, we implemented several changes recommended by the Innovation Team and their staff colleagues, including:

- Moving the self-check out machines together into one area, right at the front of the lobby;
- Adding uniform options for staff, including logo shirts, “Ask Me” buttons, and “Ask Me” aprons;
- Concentrating all staff service into a central service point, which staff named the “Hub” at Brookwood and the “Hive” at Shute Park.

We also learned there were many aspects to self-service that needed to run through the design thinking process on their own, including how patrons find and access holds and how we could ensure the availability of holds on the holds shelf, since notification of a hold often happened significantly before the hold was actually available for pickup.

The concept of design thinking can seem overwhelming, but as we have learned through this process, it is an effective tool for involving staff in helping define outcomes and in taking part in creative problem solving to reach those outcomes. 

Further Resources

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