



Reuven Cohen
Contributor

TECH 3/31/2014 @ 11:30AM 25,456 views

Design Thinking: A Unified Framework For Innovation

[Comment Now](#) [Follow Comments](#)

Over the years the question of what makes some companies, and the people within, more or less creative than others has been studied ad nauseam. The idea of innovation within business has long been thrown around, it's a kind of catchall term used for everything a company must do continue to remain relevant. We are led to

believe that without a strong amount of “innovation,” your company is surely doomed. But the realities of innovation and creativity are much more complicated than simply a willingness to be more creative.

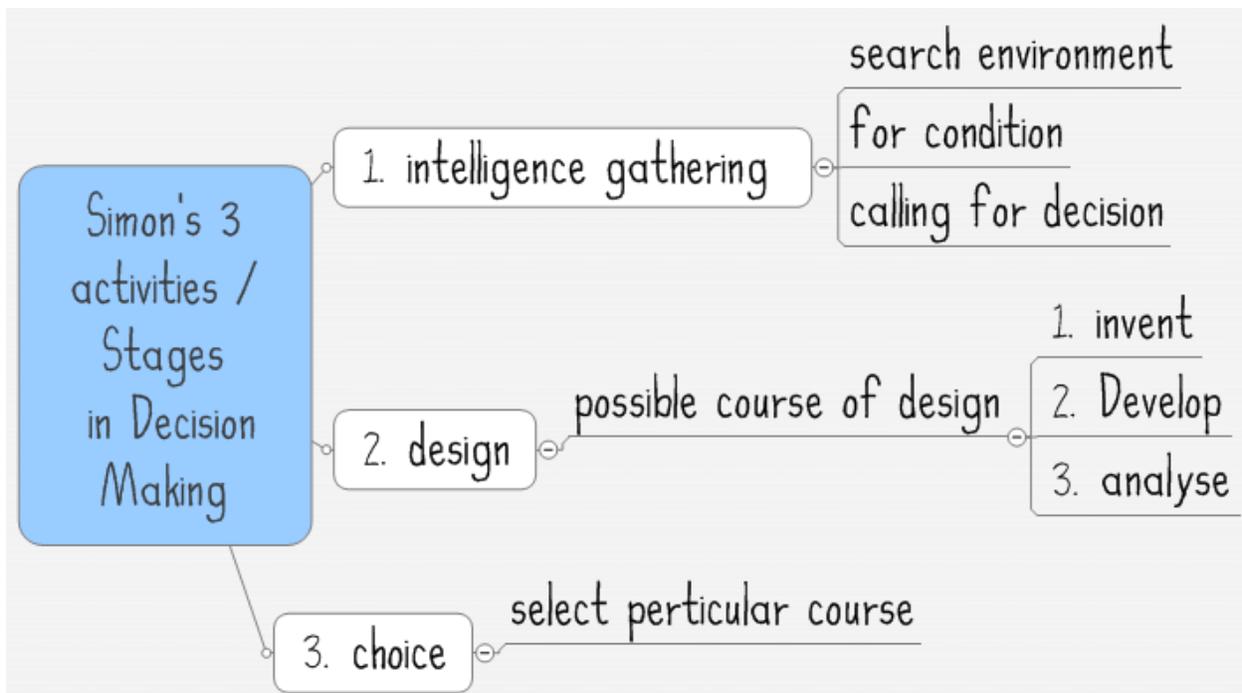
To help better understand where creativity comes from and more importantly if it can be taught, I recently had the opportunity to attend [Stanford University “Design Thinking Boot Camp: From Insights to Innovation.”](#) The program is held at The *Hasso Plattner Institute of Design*, affectionately called “[the d.school.](#)” It’s a 3 day immersive program tailored to executives, providing the opportunity to learn the concept of “design thinking” — a human-centered, prototype-driven process for innovation that can be applied to product, service, and business design.



d.school

Before I get into the program itself, first a little bit of history. Over the last 40 years or so, a number of strategies have been devised to help foster what can be best described as a formalized methodology for applying a systematic form of creativity/innovation within business. Among the more popular are a group of cognitive processes for creativity that arose from [Herbert A. Simon](#)'s 1969 book *The Sciences of the Artificial*. He was one of the

most influential social scientists of the twentieth century, among his many claims to fame was his work as a founding father of several of today's important scientific domains, including artificial intelligence, information processing, attention economics, organization theory, complex systems, and computer simulation of scientific discovery. One area of particular interest in terms of creativity and innovation is his research into decision-making and problem solving where he devised three stages in rational decision-making; Intelligence, Design, Choice (IDC).



Expanding on Herbert A. Simon's work, in 1973 Robert McKim wrote the book *Experiences in Visual Thinking*. The book focused on the ways in which perceptual thinking skills can be observed, utilized and improved, and how powerful these skills are in their "capacity to change your world of ideas and things."

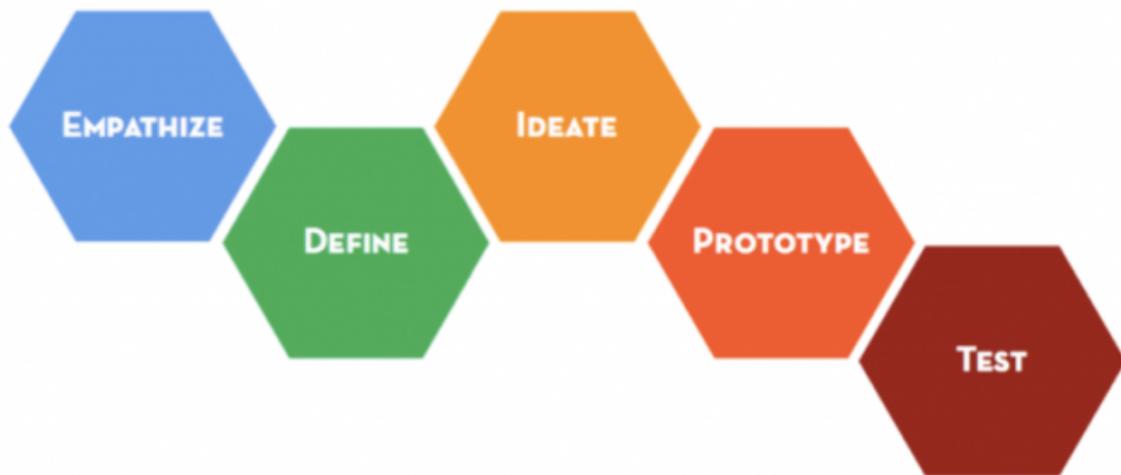
Finally in the 1980's Stanford's [Rolf Faste](#) expanded on McKim's work defining and popularizing the concept of "Design Thinking" as a method of creative action. In the simplest terms,

Design Thinking is “a formal method for practical, creative resolution of problems or issues, with the intent of an improved future result.” It’s a methodology for actualizing your concepts and ideas.

Design Thinking attempts to inspire the essential element of creativity, the ability to take an abstract idea and create something with it. It’s based upon the fundamental belief that an unexecuted idea, one that is never realized, is a worthless proposition and that doing is equally as valuable as thinking.

A big part of the Design Thinking concept involves empathy for those you are designing for. It’s often manifested through a series of activities, which attempt to create an experience of what or how your idea will ultimately be consumed. During the d.school bootcamp, this was done through a series of role-playing exercises where we played out different characters developed through joint brainstorming

sessions. These role-playing games allowed for a rapid ideation (idea generation) with the ability to visualize and adapt the results in near real-time.



Design Thinking Stages

The interesting part of Design Thinking is like the creativity it attempts to foster, the very concept itself is continually evolving. One example of a design thinking process could have several stages: *Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype and Test*. Within these steps, problems can be framed, the right questions can be asked, more ideas can be created, and the best answers can be chosen. The steps aren't linear; they can occur

simultaneously and can be repeated. The d.school offers a free [90-minute video-led cruise](#) through their methodology for anyone interested.

I admit I did enter this program a bit skeptical. Since joining Citrix last year, I've heard a lot of the Design Thinking term. But can't say I fully understood it until now. Design Thinking is a mantra that's been championed by our senior vice president of customer experience, [Catherine Courage](#). Under her encouragement, (pun intended) I'm told more than 7500 Citrix employees have gone through our internal Design Thinking courses.

Citrix isn't alone in applying this way of thinking for inspiring innovation. The Designing Thinking bootcamp included executives (both to learn and teach) from a selection of the largest global corporations. Among the more interesting instructors was [Evelyn Huang](#), Director of Design Thinking and Strategy at [Capital](#)

[One Labs](#). A Stanford / d.school Alum, Huang's mission at Capital One is to "reimagining the way 60 million people interact with their money." She's part of a growing trend within companies to reimagine what creativity is and how it can be fostered.

"We believe progress starts with a deep understanding of our customers. That's why Design Thinking is our go-to method for building the products and experiences that our customers need. This human-centered methodology, coupled with a "fail fast" attitude, allows us to quickly identify, build, and test our way to success. We spend less time planning, more time doing, and, above all else, challenge ourselves to see the world through the eyes of our customers every step of the way," says Huang.

The Design Thinking bootcamp is led by [Perry Klebahn](#), who's claim to fame include being the inventor of the modern snowshoe at Atlas Snowshoes and former CEO at

Timbuk2, the original messenger bag company. The consensus of Klebahn and the d.school team is that without implementing this systematic approach to innovation your business faces the certain risk of being disrupted or potentially worse.

The risk associated with a lack of innovation within some businesses has been deemed to be so dangerous, that recently it has led to the creation of a new executive role of “Chief Innovation Officer.” The role is an attempt to create a leader responsible for managing the process of innovation in an organization.

So what do I think about the idea of Design Thinking now? Let’s just say I have a lot more ideas and a pretty good idea of how I’m going to go about doing them.

Check out the course at <http://www.gsb.stanford.edu/exed/dtbc/>