

Design Thinking for Start-Ups: Part I

How to leverage Design Thinking methodology and mindset to bring BIG ideas to your teams



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For more on applying Design Thinking to product development, and specifically how to use the Google Ventures Sprint model, see my post [Design Thinking for Start-Ups: Part II](#).

A few weeks ago, I was asked to lead a company “Lunch & Learn”, which is a one-hour workshop over lunch. The topic? Design thinking.

Design thinking is a broad topic. It includes empathy interviews, idea generation and rapid prototyping among other topics.



As a start-up, I have found that we are pretty good at rapidly testing ideas and trying the lightest possible version first before building it out in full. We are also good at getting to

know our users, conducting user interviews and continuously collecting customer feedback.

But we sometimes struggle in brainstorming sessions to generating a lot of different ideas. People tend to evaluate ideas immediately as workable, or not, and shut down ideas that we have previously invalidated or seem “impossible”.

In this way, we limit ourselves to the ideas that only seem possible in the near-term and create a barrier between what is, and what could be.

So, I decided to focus the Lunch & Learn on idea generation, which is the fancy term for brainstorming. Since our teams found this short workshop useful, I am sharing it here so that others can hopefully use it and expand upon it with their own teams.

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I focused the workshop around four main objectives.

Goals

1. We know what design thinking is
2. We know how to build off of each other’s ideas
3. We understand best practices for brainstorming
4. We are better participants and facilitators

We know what design thinking is

I started with the basics: Design thinking is a process and a mindset for broadening your solutions to solving problems.

A short, high-level history of design thinking

- Design processes have existed for centuries, all with the end goal of improving and creating new services, experiences and products
- Design thinking stemmed from participatory design and user-centered, or human-centered design
- The term Design thinking was first used in reference to urban planning and architecture

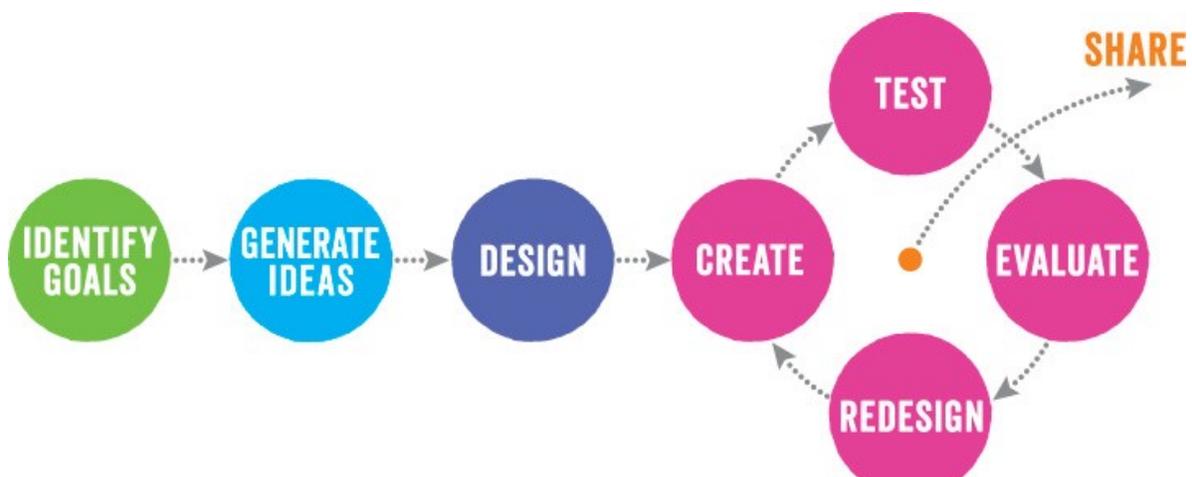
- It was applied across disciplines and codified by David Kelly, who is the founder of IDEO and who led the creation of Stanford d.school.



David Kelly, founder of IDEO and the Stanford d.school

Design thinking is a process

- **Understand the problem.** Identify it, name it. This typically comes from talking to and observing users to build empathy.
- **Generate ideas.** Without constraints of existing solutions.
- **Create simple prototypes.** Learn by doing. Aim for short, light experiments that help you learn more.
- **Test, evaluate & redesign.** Again and again. The “washing-machine” of the Innovator’s Process.



Design thinking is also a Mindset

There are many ways designers have described the mindsets needed for design thinking. Here are three that I think are especially helpful for the Start-up context:

- **Curiosity.** Get to know your design audience. Be curious about the world, new technology and possibilities.
- **Courage.** Push yourself outside of your comfort-zone. If you are used to talking a lot, try listening and visa versa.
- **Confidence.** Do not be afraid to fail. You need to push through a lot of crappy ideas to get to the one that will be a success. Failure is inherent to the process.



Most of your ideas will be crap. It's okay, get used to it.

To wrap up, Design thinking is

- A process AND a mindset
- A way to approach a problem
- A call to be a beginner, not an expert

- Participatory — talking & listening

We know how to build off of each other's ideas

We played a quick improv-style game called “Yes, and...” to warm up and to get in the right frame of mind.

Yes, and...

1. One person starts with a short statement or sentence
2. The next person starts their sentence with the phrase, “yes, and...” something related to what was said before.
3. You keep going around the circle in this way until you are back at the beginning.

The story you create together is meandering and wacky, but the goal is to get everyone to start listening to what was said and building off of that to keep the story moving forward.

I asked a volunteer to start us off and he came up with, “There is a machine that creates Elephants...” and it only got weirder from there.

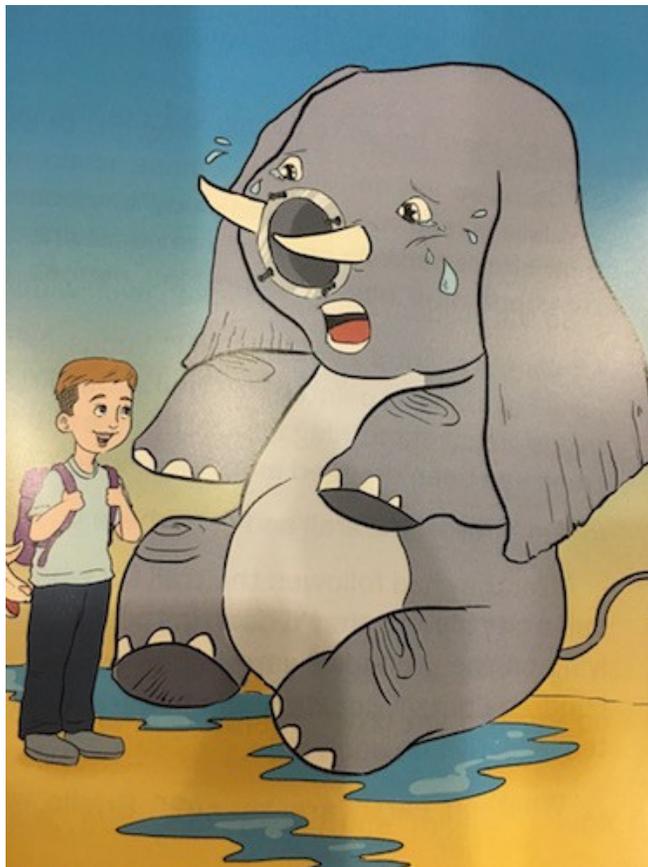


Image from the Goat's Coat, by Kathy Ellis and illustrated by Shannen Marie Paradero

We understand best practices for brainstorming

I presented a synthesis list of best practices and had volunteers popcorn-share them out.

Brainstorming Best Practices

- Be Positive!
- Think BIG
- Everyone contributes.
- Build on each other's ideas
- Go for quantity!
- Think about the future, not what has or hasn't worked in the past.
- Stick to the topic.
- Write it down or draw it out!

We then practiced these by brainstorming around a simple topic: What should be our holiday party theme?

I acted as scribe and wrote down a few words for each idea that was shared out-loud: French, Wild West, Dress like a celebrity, etc.



Taking inspiration from Phyllis.

We then we chose one of those ideas to build off of to create a hub-and-spoke effect. Using different color markers helps too.



I forgot to take a photo of the board, so this is a terrible stock image.

After practicing this process, we were ready to brainstorm in small groups.

We are better participants and facilitators

Problem Statements

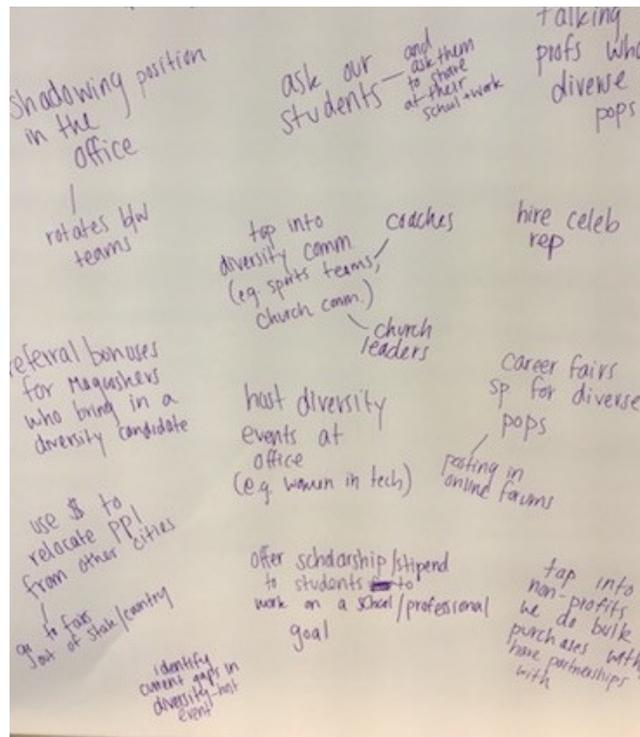
In order to tie the concept of idea generation to our work, before the workshop, I interviewed 5 colleagues, whose quarterly goals were challenging and not yet achieved, but were also fairly well defined and had many possible solutions.

I recorded these people talking about the problem for 1–2 minutes. In the video interview, they answered these questions:

1. What is the problem?
2. Why is it important?
3. Who is the audience?
4. What would success look like?

Small Group Brainstorms

Groups of 4–5 watched one of the recorded problem statements and then brainstormed solutions.



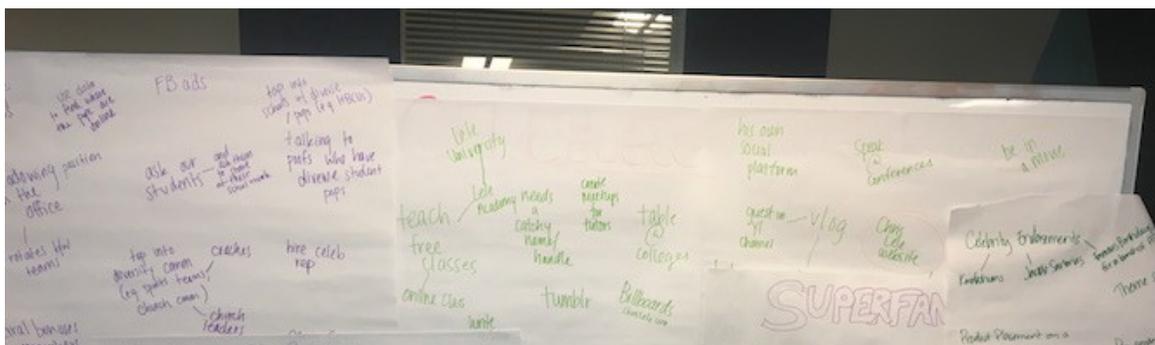
Notes from one of the brainstorming sessions.

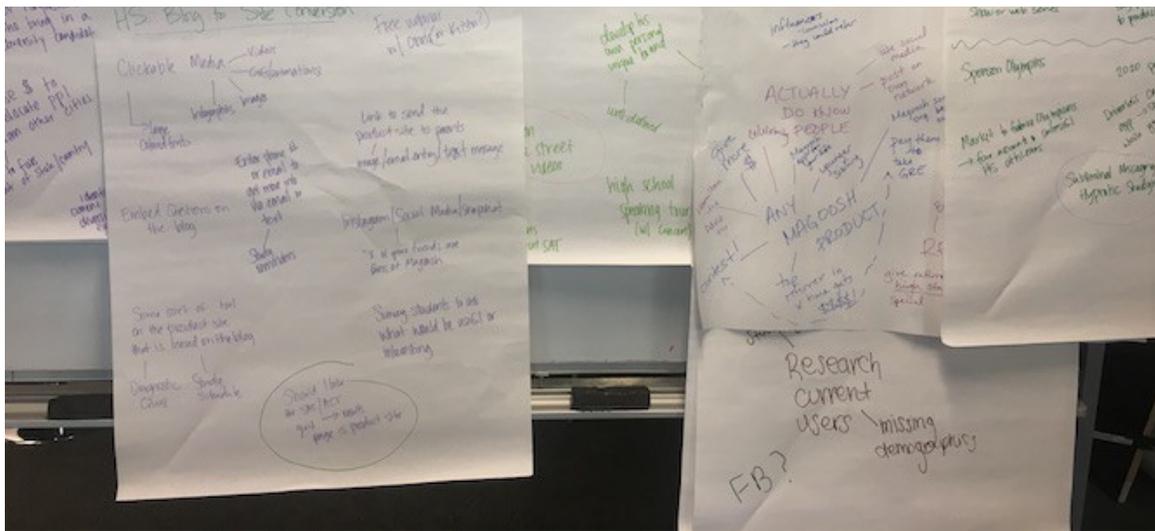
Think Big Prompts

After about 10 minutes of free-form brainstorming I interjected with a “think big” prompt and had groups continue to brainstorm for a few more minutes per prompt with that new idea in mind. We only had time for two “think big” prompts, but here is a list of five:

- What if you had a million dollars?
- What if you were doing this with future technology?
- What if you could use magic?
- What if your 5-year old self were doing this?
- What if it had to get you in trouble with your manager?

These prompts help expand the constraints that people tend to put on their own ideas.





All the brainstorm sheets after the "think big" prompts.

Idea Capture

To evaluate these ideas for their breadth and potential usefulness, groups then filled out an "Idea Capture" google doc with these instructions:

Document a few ideas from your brainstorm. Use the questions below to determine which ideas you share here. Try to answer each question with a unique idea. You can choose more than one idea per question.

1. What is the most unexpected idea that arose from your brainstorm?
2. What is an idea that sparked the most new ideas?
3. What is the craziest, never-going-to-happen idea that you came up with?
4. What is one idea that we could test, in a very light way, tomorrow?
5. Which idea are you most excited to share with the Magoosher who defined your problem?

These documents are now shared with all of the teams and have been especially interesting for those working on the stated problems!

Debrief & Reflection

Finally, we debrief and reflected on the activity. I asked everyone to look back at the brainstorming best practices and asked:

- Which of these were easy and which were hard?
- What worked well for your group?

- What tactics did groups use to overcome roadblocks?

While many groups reflected that they did go on tangents and sometimes reacted negatively to an idea, having awareness of the best practices helped keep teams on track.

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It will be interesting to see how taking an hour to learn about and practice brainstorming impacts the way teams generate ideas in the future. And who knows, maybe one of the crazy ideas we came up with will spark something brilliant.

Drop a comment to let me know what you think of this workshop. If you try it, let us know what worked well for you and if there is anything that you modified!

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