DESIGN THINKING INTRODUCTION

Q. How many designers does it take to change a light bulb?
A. Does it have to be a light bulb?

Design thinking is a human-centered approach to solving problems using the tools of design to gather inspiration, build empathy, and create solutions. It had its origins in the design of products, but its application grew to include nearly all business or organizational issues, including services, spaces, and experiences of all kinds: new business platforms, improved hospital processes, retail supply-chain improvements, city district redevelopment, aid for the developing world, and strategies for government, academic, and nonprofit institutions.

The light-bulb joke at the top contains a fundamental truth about design thinking: it starts by questioning the parameters of the problem. It tries, by various methods, to insure that we are solving the right problem, and it continues to ask questions at every step we make towards a solution. This can be uncomfortable for people who just need to *get on with it, already,* but it's a necessary part of the process.

Despite the popular conception of designers as fashion-conscious creative geniuses, design thinking is not primarily concerned with aesthetics, except in balance with all the other factors of a successful solution. And design thinking can be practiced by all decision-makers, if they are given the support and resources necessary to apply it. In a sense, all of us are designers, and we make design-like decisions in our life and work all the time. (Not surprisingly, some design professionals chafe at this idea.)

There are many articles and books that can help you learn about design thinking, but the best way is to just try it. A full-day or longer workshop can be a good starting point. A facilitator can bring a group through a series of exercises to introduce the basic concepts:

- Identify the real constraints of the problem *(Does it have to be a light bulb?)*
- Find usable insights by conducting observations and gaining empathy
- Effectively brainstorm and collaborate as a team
- Try experiments and prototypes to test ideas and assumptions
- Use storytelling to communicate solutions convincingly

Design thinking programs can be tailored to address a group's specific project or strategy, and a project-length engagement with experienced mentors can impart the skills and experience to make design thinking a daily part of a company's development process. It is most effective to learn the techniques while tackling a design challenge integral to the organization's success.

Please feel free to explore the links and works listed on the Design Thinking Resources list to learn more about this powerful and necessary approach to creative problem-solving.