The Karate Kid Moment

I work full time. I travel regularly. I have a 6-month old son. And I'm a student in the inaugural cohort of the Strategic Design MBA program at Philadelphia University. I chose to be a part of this class in part because I loved the idea of being involved in its creation and development, and because I saw so many applications of design to all aspects of my life. In the beginning I imagined the many ways I would be involved beyond the classroom: campus events, networking opportunities, regular discussions with my co-workers about what I was learning and how we could bring design thinking to our business.

I'm not ashamed to admit that despite my good intentions I've had my head down for much of the program, focused more on completion than application. The courses move quickly; at times it feels like they're over in an instant, and then we're on to the next. I wondered if things were sinking in sufficiently, if I would truly bring something different to the table after graduation than before I began. I no longer wonder, as I recently had my Karate Kid Moment.

In the 1984 classic, Mr. Miyagi's unorthodox training program has young Daniel doing a number of tasks that seem unrelated to mastering the martial arts. He begrudgingly obliges, but doesn't quite see the point. Until he does. Daniel's Karate Kid Moment came when he was ready to quit and Mr. Miyagi showed him that "wax on, wax off" wasn't just about polishing cars. Mine came recently upon taking a new role at work.

I was recently put in charge of a new group. We are accountable for taking years of research and ideas and turning them into tangible products and services for our clients. As soon as I had my new objective the path forward was obvious—and nothing like it would have been 14 months ago before I began the Strategic Design MBA. Without fully realizing it, design thinking has taken root. I may not remember every detail, model, and theory, but there's no doubt that I approach challenges differently. In particular two words came to mind which have shaped every action taken since, and for me, represent the essence of design thinking: empathy and prototyping.

I've developed products before, and it usually went something like this: take our knowledge and expertise and design what we feel to be a great solution to the problem. It usually takes a while to get everything together and it isn't tested much along the way, other than amongst ourselves. The result is usually pretty great. The problem is, nobody

uses it. Ourselves included, which is a bright red flag, all too easy to ignore. So it goes back on the shelf until we decide it's time to revitalize it, and the process repeats again.

This time around things are different. For starters, I'm more thoughtful about the end user and what their experience will be. An entire work stream is now devoted to ethnography, so that we may gain new insights about our clients that help us design tools they'll want and love to use. It's not that we didn't think we needed to understand our clients—it's that we thought we already did. But this understanding was based on a more communal notion of people, rather than an actual individual person. We're on a path now to talk to people, to observe them, and to understand them anew.

I'm eager to try things out and even more eager to fail, so that I can learn and iterate and make things better. I know now that the first draft is just that—a draft—and the sooner I get it in the hands of people and find its cracks, the sooner I can fill them in. I no longer worry about getting things right, I worry about getting them done. I can and will adjust them later. I'm free to keep things simple and rough because the most important thing I can do is to just make something. I'm finding that by making ideas tangible early, others are more able to contribute at a stage where they can really make a difference as well.

I'm also more curious than ever about the big picture, and how everything connects. This led to a project that I am particularly passionate about. I've long seen connections between ideas that show up in various different courses and programs and it's no secret that everything we do is fundamentally related. But I felt we had reached a point where the nature of these connections needed to be articulated. By stepping back and taking a systems thinking approach, I've drafted a model of how everything interrelates. This model started as post-its on my wall, and I'm confident that if I hadn't just rolled up my sleeves and gotten started, if I had worried about the "best way" to think about it, I'd still be scratching my head.

Looking back, it's all so obvious. Of course we need to understand our clients. Of course it's better to start simple and build organically than try to get everything right in one shot. Of course it's helpful to keep the big picture in mind, even when you're down in the weeds. But it's only obvious if you think about it. And that, for me, is what design thinking is all about: thinking. If you're really thinking, design will naturally follow.

By David Marshall