

THE ROLE OF THE DESIGN COACH - A NOVEL APPROACH TO ACHIEVING 360 COLLABORATION BETWEEN INDUSTRY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

There is significant latent design talent within the broader business community, however, much of the design potential is isolated, and, lacks the necessary focus to manifest positive commercial outcomes. Research has indicated that this situation is due to a myopic design development process that is typically caused by the lack of larger team dynamics, reporting structures, and more formal review and feedback processes.

The role of the coach is well established in business environments, where, a specialist practitioner enables an environment that supports personal and operational development. Unfortunately the concept of the design coach is not as well established because, typically, the environmental mix does not always offer foundation for reliable coaching practice. Moreover, it is often challenging to establish a credible design coach within the conflicting parameters of the creative focus and the commercial focus of the smaller design business.

This paper discusses the core findings from a recent study of the assignment of a design coach from a higher educational establishment to a small Australian bespoke guitar manufacturing business, during the transition of the operation from a functional craft orientated business into a design driven business. The paper illustrates how a credible design coach can strengthen emerging design talent and assist in directing the business in returning the optimum benefit for effort. The paper also illustrates the framework for both creative and commercial engagement that was developed from the work that catalysed true design collaboration between industry and academic partners and the return contribution into the educational environment.

Keywords: Design coaching, coaching, guitar design, differentiation

1 INTRODUCTION

Typically, it can be difficult for emerging design talent to grow into a mature and robust design capability. This is especially the case when the emerging designer has not progressed through recognised training and education providers, and it is further exacerbated when the emerging designer is practicing in a niche area. In these types of scenarios, isolation is not uncommon and myopic design threads and solutions are typically pursued by the designer, that do not push the boundaries of the designers practice and result in lackluster work and/or failure to connect with the marketplace [1].

This paper describes a case example of the use of a design coach to overcome potentially practice limiting challenges by a small Australian bespoke guitar manufacturing business (ILE) and offers a framework for creative and commercial engagement. The program of work was conducted between a coach from academia and the ILE industry specialist, illustrating the potential of full 360 collaboration, where the academic contributed positively into ILE and ILE contributed positively into business teaching. The main participants of the case study were the two contributing authors of this paper.

2 THE RATIONALE FOR COACHING AND METHODOLOGY

To get from "A" to "B", an individual needs a higher level of understanding. For this to happen the individual will need motivation and this is where coaching is useful [2]. Coaching is now finding favour in many aspects of business, but the links to outcome are often tenuous [3]. However,

coaching should increase the effectiveness of the individual and corporate performance, if the coach can lead the client through a gradual process of convergence of meaning and understanding [4],[5] and as such it is suggested that there is as much benefit for an entity in using a design coach as there is in using a business coach.

Action coaching was used as the methodology used during this work. This methodology relies on a cooperative relationship developing between the coach and coachee and is particularly useful in this type of process because it offers a wider canvas for interaction [7]. Typically, a three stage process is conducted during the program of work [7] that consists of:

- Identification of the desired outcome
- Building on existing strengths and capabilities
- Commitment to moving forward

This three stage process complements the theoretical transition model (discussed below) that was used as a basis of controlled change within the program of work.

3 THE PROBLEM

Prior to the program of coaching, ILE had developed a strong reputation for the hand crafting of acoustic guitars constructed from exotic Australian tone woods. A signature feature of these instruments was the unique tonal quality. Unfortunately however, visually, potential customers often compared the guitars, to mass produced product by other manufacturers as the guitars were produced along traditionally accepted design principles and often lacked superior differentiation in this aspect. This customer comparison, although unfounded, placed ILE in the top left quartile of the Strategic Positioning (Value) Model (see Figure 1.) making return on effort difficult for ILE [8].

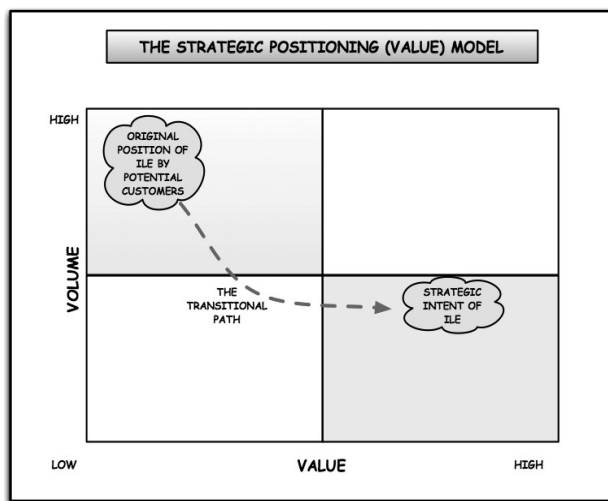


Figure 1. The Strategic Positioning (Value) Model

ILE needed to move from its externally perceived low value market position into an uncontested high value proposition [9]. To achieve this objective, ILE also had to move from “technical practitioner” focused practice (i.e. master builder) into “conceptual design realisation” focused practice (i.e. design master). Recognising that this was not a process that could be done in isolation, ILE began a collaboration process with a coach, who had extensive, practical design knowledge, based within the Sydney Business School, University of Wollongong, Australia.

ILE had recognised that the problem focused on their strategic position (perceived to be a “business” issue) and thus connected with the Business School for assistance. Almost paradoxically, it was identified that the issue of ILE could be solved by developing and emphasising the design capability of ILE and thereby develop a unique position based on the core strengths of ILE. This recognition came from the Business School participant, because of his blend of design and business experience. This type of cross discipline or cross silo capability within academia is rare, and, on reflection, it is not

certain if this outcome could have been achieved if the Business School participant had only business knowledge.

4 THE THEORETICAL TRANSITION PROCESS

The change from “master builder” where ILE was positioned in 2010, to the strategic intent of “design master” in 2012 could not be achieved a single jump as practices and processes were required to be developed and instilled within the business and design practices of the emerging “design master”. Using Keidel’s (2010) [10] model as a basis, a four step transition program was developed as a part of the coaching activity (See Figure 2.).

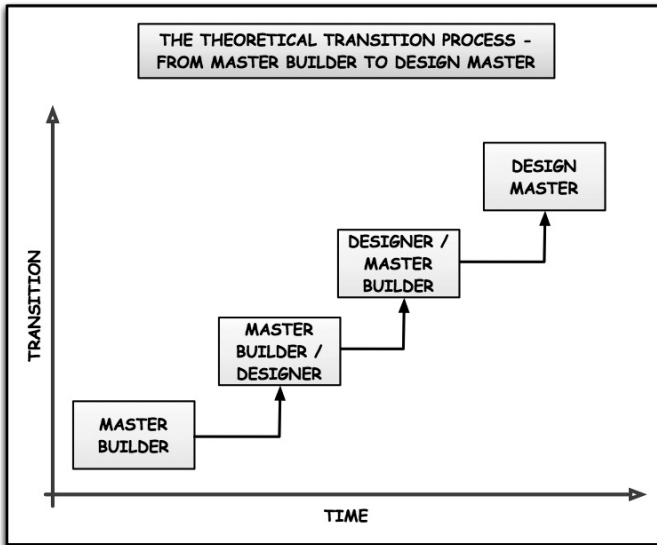


Figure 2. The Theoretical Transition Process - From Master Builder to Design Master (adapted from Keidel (2010))

5 A DEMONSTRATION OF THE APPLIED TRANSITION PROCESS

A combination of the action coaching model and the transition model were used as a framework during this work. Change was achieved in incremental stages where the improvements in the aesthetic and engineering design of the guitars were measured against their marketability and price point.

Overall, the framework proved to be robust, and demonstrable milestone designs were developed and constructed as planned. These designs are illustrated in Figure 3.

During the transition process, it was noted that as the design capability increased within ILE, the build capability also increased in a pro-rata fashion. ILE had produced a significant number of traditionally designed acoustic guitars in the ten years prior to the transition process. All of the guitars were considered by peers to be of high quality. There was no expectation by the coach or coachee that build quality of the guitars would increase within the traditional design parameters of the acoustic guitar. However, as the design axioms of the guitar were challenged, the build solutions were also challenged and, as such, demanded novel solutions and not simply a standard solution used on a previous guitar. As such, it is believed that a reinvigoration of craftsmanship was catalysed by the introduction of the novel designs.

Furthermore, the element of novelty within ILE began driving an expectation of change and innovation within the market, that of itself, increased demand and perception of value and rarity that further contributed in moving ILE to its strategic goal of a high value player.

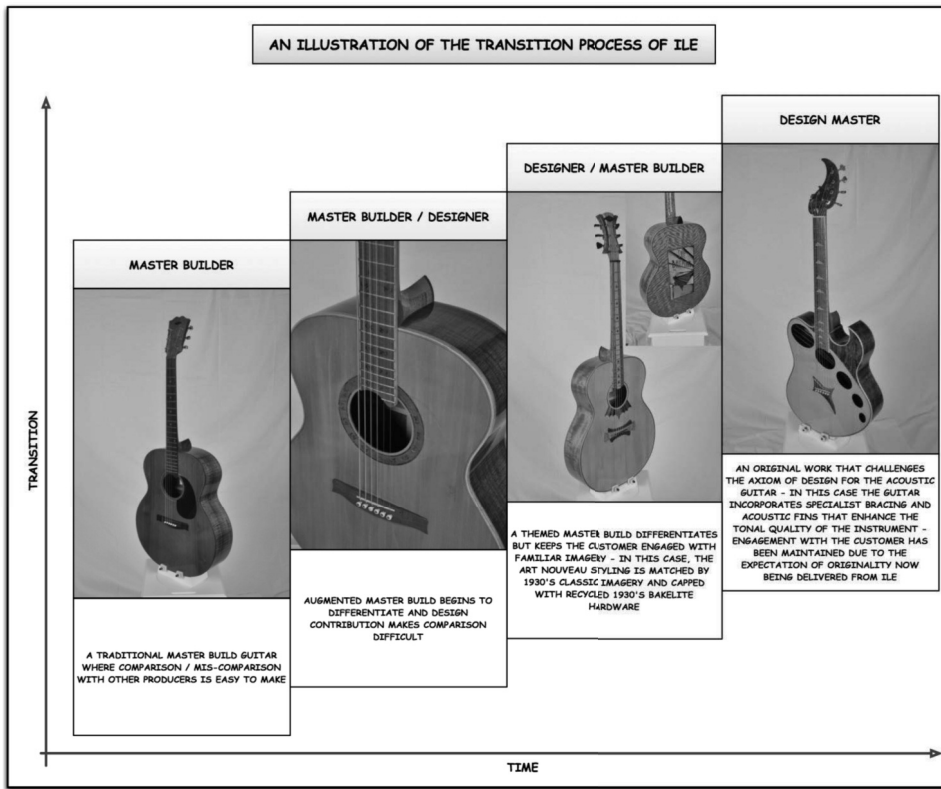


Figure 3. An Illustration of the Transition Process of ILE

6 THE NEED FOR A DUALITY COACHING APPROACH

Within the context of this work, the focus of the coaching process was around being able to generate income and saleable product, that was acceptable to the market place, and not simply well crafted instruments. The objective was ultimately achieved when the coachee won an industry coveted first in class at Australia's premier Royal Show and also penetrated a new, height worth, Asian market.

It is typically easy to become focused on the specific design coaching content of the transition of ILE, however, it is important to note that there was a duality of coaching both within the design and business areas and without a dual approach, it is doubtful that the objectives would have been achieved. The business elements included overall strategic, business and market development aspects. Without the business elements being addressed at the same time as the design elements, the transition process could have failed, because ILE might have been strategically well positioned but operationally deficient to deliver the desired outcome. For example, concentrating on the design aspects alone would have resulted in the best product, but no market. Conversely concentrating on the business aspects alone would have resulted in the best market but no product.

7 THE GAP AND LESSONS LEARNED

Initially, the decision to utilise a coach was triggered by the need to differentiate the market position of ILE (i.e. a standard business centric issue). However, a number of "false starts" occurred prior to the activity outlined in this paper. It is thought that the earlier interactions, with other third party support providers (i.e. small business consultants) failed to deliver to the expectation of ILE, because of the lack of background of the coach in either design and/or the guitar industry. As such, previous

coaches could only focus on theoretical business solutions without understanding the dynamics of this particular sector (i.e. authentic reputation of the coach) and share the passion of ILE and bespoke guitar design.

ILE was more confident at the beginning of this specific process, as the coach had a background in both design and the guitar sector, and as such, there was more buy in and open interaction throughout the process. Furthermore, the coach was able to contribute practical design knowledge at critical stages alongside the necessary business support. However, the process could only move as fast as ILE was able to manage and a great deal of patience was needed, this was factored into the planning of the growth stages.

ILE had always possessed latent design capability, however, this was shrouded in strong a strong craft bias that, because of its heritage, typically blocked design freedom that would ultimately deliver the transition. As such, this work was not about surrogate design being overlaid onto the process of ILE, but rather bringing forward and nurturing capability that was already present and establishing that capability as the core element of the business moving forward.

It is unlikely that anyone can become a design coach without possessing embedded design skills. During this work, there was a clear need for specific intervention points, by the coach, that would not have been possible without core design skills. Should design coaching become a mainstream activity, it is perceived that the coaches will be drawn from design backgrounds and acquire coaching skills, rather than being drawn from coaching backgrounds and acquire design skills.

8 THE FRAMEWORK

A framework for design coaching has been established from this work (see Figure 4). The framework incorporates six core areas in a blended fashion. Importantly, the work has demonstrated that there is a need for the coach to be competent in both the business and design aspects if an effective outcome is to take place in a bespoke operation such as ILE. This competency is necessary, because unlike larger organisations, there is no spare resource in an operation such as ILE to champion the necessary aspects of the change and a more physical and interactive approach is necessary (i.e. a focus on the “how to” not the “should do”) if success is to be achieved.

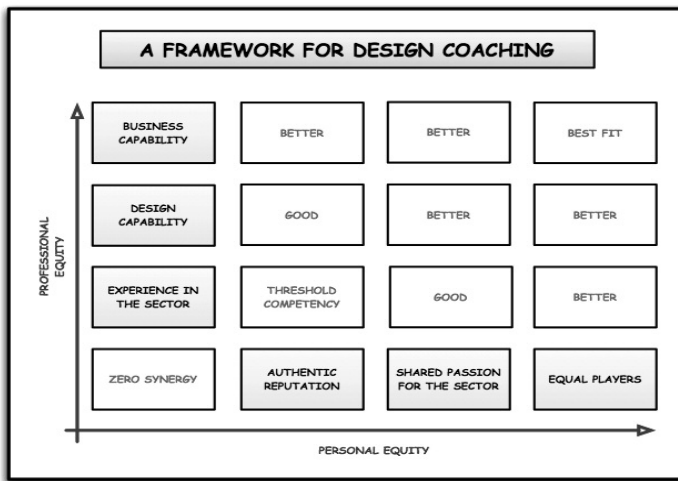


Figure 4. A Framework for Design Coaching

9 CONCLUSIONS

Design coaching can be effective in strengthening and transitioning design capability. However, traditional business centric coaching may not be sufficient in areas where significant tacit knowledge and/or authentic capability are present. It is therefore suggested that coaches with specific industry knowledge and practical competency might offer a closer fit and tangible value catalyst to a design focused business for example.

The work has highlighted that there is a tendency for a shared contribution between the coach and client within a design/knowledge based business and a high degree of trust is necessary. Contribution at critical stages of the process appears to be a natural phenomena and the coach typically becomes the “extra resource” the designer needs to reach the next level or critical mass. This is atypical within more conventional coaching practice where a “listening and questioning” methodology prevails. However, a 360 collaboration does appear to be the natural result of this type of engagement, where for example ILE contributed to a number of academic business courses on innovation and strategy.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER WORK

The concept of design coaching is relatively new within the relatively new discipline of business coaching. It is therefore recommended that the Framework for Design Coaching is investigated further.

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