



Q1 INFLUENCE: STEWARDSHIP

Leading Relevance: Design, Innovation and the Future Possible

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Leading Relevance: Design, Innovation and the Future Possible

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Ana Pinto da Silva examines leadership responsibilities and meanings

Covid has forced a reckoning. The pandemic has placed a klieg-light on the intense challenges presented by climate change, health and equity, rewriting our shared global trajectory.

Since the 1st COVID-19 case was detected, we have traveled around the sun together as a global community, more closely bound than ever before. With each solar circumnavigation, we have born witness to personal and collective struggles large and small, seeking to find balance as the intensity of work, family, community and care continue their almost imperceptible yet unrelenting accretion. And while Omicron's epidemiological curves are finally – after a long, hard winter – bending towards a new, (hopefully) sweeter season, the impact of COVID, now amplified by the unconscionable war in Ukraine, continues to re-write our lives, challenging us to reconsider our choices and actions. Not just as design leaders and innovators, but as parents, partners, siblings, friends and members of our broader global human community.

Although the weight and composition of our individual challenges may differ, we have – each of us have shown up. Day after day, moment after moment – picking ourselves up, to lend a hand to others, to re-center ourselves, our families, our

colleagues and our communities, to recalibrate, to succeed, to fail and try again. In essence, to lead.

The need to reconsider design, leadership and personal responsibility in light of a rapidly changing world has become ever more urgent.

Leading

Across design disciplines, generations and geographies, we are each other's teachers. Each of us—regardless of our age, creative discipline, geography, or practice area—is a critical part of our design innovation ecosystem. A reconsideration of leadership within the unique context of design is essential as we prepare to face the challenges ahead, seeking to create the reimagined infrastructure of innovation the world requires to bring forth the full promise of the 21st century.

The subject of leadership is vast.

An Amazon search for leadership books returns over 70,000 entries on subjects as varied as “Savage Leadership” and “Servant Leadership”. In contrast, a Google image search on the same topic results in a homogeneity of male-oriented corporate imagery that immediately invite challenge and debate, inviting re-evaluation of fundamental questions:

- What is leadership?
- How is leadership defined?
- Who leads?
- What is the unique responsibility of leaders in a rapidly changing world?

Opinions abound. According to management guru Peter Drucker, *“The only definition of a leader is someone who has followers.”*

Leadership expert John C. Maxwell agrees. *“Remove for a moment the moral issues behind it, and there is only one definition: Leadership is the ability to obtain followers. To paraphrase a proverb...If you think you are leading, and no one is following, you are only taking a walk.”*

Tom Robbins offers a contrasting view.

“Everyone can be a leader. Leadership is not a zero-sum equation. When one person harnesses their powers to lead, it strengthens the leadership opportunities of others, rather than diminishing them. That’s because the ultimate definition of leadership is empowering others to become effective leaders as well.”

Who is right? Which definition prevails? Is leadership exceptional or common? Does leadership require followers, or can one person lead alone?

Is there a shared definition? [Warren Bennis](#) and [Robert J. Thomas](#), authors of HBR’s seminal paper [“The Crucibles of Leadership”](#) suggest these:

- The ability to engage others in shared meaning.
- A distinctive and compelling voice.
- A sense of integrity (including a strong set of values).
- And finally, “adaptive capacity” — “an almost magical ability to transcend adversity, with all its attendant stresses, and to emerge stronger than before.”



A powerful alchemy occurs when we connect leadership to relevance to responsibility. We travel. We go. We illuminate. We clarify. We reveal. We built bonds forged on trust. We face challenges. We learn. We change. We grow. We become something anew. Stronger. Together.

As varied as these definitions are, almost all are predicated on the notion of leader first, with followers behind. We often think of leaders and the act of leadership as grand moments performed by almost super-human individuals, captured and codified in a series of magnificent, courageous gestures.

Examples? General Washington crossing the Delaware. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the March on Washington. Neil Armstrong and his first steps on the Moon. Or even as Michael Douglas as Gordon Gekko in the movie *Wall Street*, exemplifying the power of charismatic, positional leadership even at its most amoral.

Personal Leadership

What is less understood are the quieter, more personal – and perhaps more powerful – aspects of leadership. Moments likely not captured in a photo or memorialized in a painting. Leadership often happens within moments of profound privacy, moments unseen and unsung by others. Moments of care and courage. Of tenderness in the face of hard lessons. Of humility and the often painful arc of true learning.

Moments alone when we confront the chasms of misunderstanding we have not yet addressed, and making the often difficult choice to confront ourselves and our fears -- and for once -- to face what we do not know, opening and decentering ourselves as we move towards learning and growth, finding new awareness and new sources of strength that invite us into vulnerability and towards courage, as we emerge forward into new landscapes of meaning and opportunity.

Leadership can be most powerfully expressed in the unsung moments of our lives. A parent struggling to learn how to calm a toddler in full meltdown, leaning in with compassion to understand the fundamental heartbreak of a broken cookie or

a lost toy and easing tears towards solution and relief. A sister bringing family together in a moment of crisis to map a path forward to help an older parent in need. A friend or colleague showing up to care, to advocate or even to confront as bias makes its all too often unchecked journey across lives, families and communities, undermining the power we all possess to contribute and lead. In its quietest, most fundamental moments, leadership is personal.

To better understand the connection between our personal growth as people and our ability to lead, especially within the context of future-forward design, I reached out to my design community via LinkedIn. Leaders across design disciplines, backgrounds and experiences shared their heartfelt views:

- + *“I’ve found that leadership is about focus, attention and service. Focus is how we can get things done. Without focus, there’s no progress. Attention is the rarest and most precious resource, and giving attention, paying attention is what makes or breaks teams, communities, products, customers and cultures. Attention is a building block of love. Service is always knowing that you’re there to serve the greater purpose, enable, clear the path, engage in the most meaningful way.”* – **Seda Evis, VP Strategy, Adjunct Professor at USD, Designer-in-Residence at UCSD Design Lab.**
- + *“Leadership isn’t about who’s the loudest in the room (unfortunately I’ve seen this), it’s about who facilitating the best in people to come out. A leader is a facilitator in many ways!”* – **Isha Hans, Research Driven Designer focused on Privacy for IoT environments at CMU.**
- + *“The leaders I admire most have a love of truth, focus and compassion. They are truth seekers and truth sayers, who others*

trust to do both. They have a focus that helps sift through to what matters most and keep visions alive. And, they value and motivate people which makes them lead with compassion.”

– **Susan Motte, Principal Director, Product Planner at Chewy, Ex-Amazon Head of Research for Amazon Glow**

- + *“Leadership is the act of inspiring and guiding others to achieve more than they thought possible.”* – **Rob Haitani, Sr UX Design Manager, Alexa Experiences at Amazon**
- + *“A leader is a strategist with clarity of the mission, a storyteller who can capture the imagination of each individual team member, is invisible to enable others to become great, holds truth to overcome divisiveness, looks for the goodness before judgment, and finds beautiful mistakes to learn from.”* – **Joseph Laurino, Lead Creative Technologist, Lowe’s Innovation Labs**
- + and finally, according to **Michael Huang, Founder and Managing Director at Milli** *“Leadership is recognizing my own position of power and learning how to move through every moment without an ego or a playbook. Leadership has simply become integrated with who I am and how to treat others - especially in the context of power and privilege.”*

Where does this leave us? Understanding where we sit within this rich sea of meaning provides a first step towards purposeful navigation. An exploration of first principles feels germane.



What we acknowledge and what we do not acknowledge throughout the design process reflects our broader values – good, bad and indifferent. A recognized value is expressed. An unrecognized value is suppressed.

Defining Leadership

What is leadership? Despite the explosive interest in leadership and leadership principles in our modern world, our understanding of the term leadership is very recent.

Emerging at the advent of the industrial revolution in the early 1820's, the idea of a leader as the brilliant and courageous person (ok, man...) astride an organizational pyramid, commanding troops/workers/followers, emerges in lock step with the rapidly evolving technological infrastructure of the 19th and 20th centuries, giving shape to the resulting world of work that has defined our lives ever since.

The connection between change, innovation, opportunity and leadership belies a deeper etymological intent. If we swim upstream just a little bit further to unpack this genealogical etymology, a generative set of understandings begins to emerge.

The word leadership is rooted in the word “to lead”, which stems from the Old English *lēad* (“lead”), and the Proto-Germanic **laudan* (“lead”). Across its rich Northern European etymology – whether in Irish, Swedish, Lithuanian or Dutch, the word lead is connected to the concept of a sounding line or plum-line.

But as we continue our etymological journey further towards the Proto-Indo-European root word, to lead means “to flow”. Chasing upstream to find the source of this rich etymological stream, the word lead emerges from the simplest of concepts: to go, to travel.

If we consider these intertwined etymologies as an invitation to first principles, then to lead is to be guided forth by the inherent trueness of a sounding line, it is the moment of release as we give in to the truth of our internal “flow”, it is the moment we step forward, taking the first uncertain, yet determined steps in a journey away from the known towards the emergence of a new reality. This meaning is not predicated on having people follow. Nor is it anchored in the notion of being “first”. It simply means to be urged forward, “To Go”. To travel. To grow.

The words Relevance and Responsibility are similarly fascinating.

Relevance. The English word “relevant” comes from the Latin word “levo”, which means to lighten, to mitigate, to elevate, to lift up, to ease, to lessen, to comfort. And for those of you who took ballet in your youth, is beautifully expressed in the French ballet position relevé.

Responsibility. The English word responsible comes from the Latin word “spondeo”, meaning with reference to. It means to guarantee, to promise for another, to become security for a person, to marry, to pledge, contract or vow. In essence, “spondeo” means to become bound through trust and trust worthiness. And like the Proto-European Root word of Lead, it also means to re-sound, to re-echo, to plumb an unknown depth and report back accurately, even in the face of a difficult truth.

What can we make of all this? A powerful alchemy occurs when we connect leadership to relevance to responsibility. We travel. We go. We illuminate. We clarify. We reveal. We built bonds forged on trust. We face challenges. We learn. We change. We grow. We become something anew. Stronger. Together.

Given all this, how then do we ground leadership in the rough and tumble of our very real lives as designers today?

The Power of Design

Designers are a critical part of the world’s imaginative engine, marking and celebrating even the most mundane moments of the human endeavor. The task of design is to imagine the future, being both parent and mid-wife to ideas and visions large and small. Designers help frame lenses through which we understand and communicate who we are and how we relate to each other and our world – as individuals, as tribes, and as communities.



We have tremendous access. We have remarkable privilege. Our individual and collective choices matter.

As designers, we work at the invitation of our clients. In partnership with them, our work channels the hopes, dreams and aspirations of our society writ large, translating them into built forms, tangible objects, digital tools and experiences. What we acknowledge and what we do not acknowledge throughout the design process reflects our broader values — good, bad and indifferent. A recognized value is expressed. An unrecognized value is suppressed. It is within this imperfect vision that we give shape to our aspirations, creating landscapes of opportunity that are accessible to some, yet out of reach for others.

The Coronavirus Pandemic puts us on a direct collision course with our very notion of design, forcing a reflective stillness upon us while accelerating longstanding trends with a whiplash akin to a car wreck. The pandemic demands a reckoning, inviting us to

reassess our accomplishments as a collective design innovation community, shining light on what we have achieved, but also making plain what we have missed and who we have failed to serve.

In this moment of generative reckoning, we are challenged to re-imagine new, hybrid places of living, learning and becoming, reconnecting more vividly with each other and the natural world around us, posing new questions:

- How will we reframe community in the post-pandemic era?
- How will we address the ongoing challenges presented by climate change?
- How will we reconnect people to each other and to the natural world that surrounds us?
- How might we make access to the power of design universal, reimagining our spaces and places to create more equitable, accessible and inclusive communities for all?

The most powerful questions are simple. They are direct. Try as we might, we cannot turn away from the challenges they pose. At its most fundamental level, a question does more than demand an answer. A question defines a journey. One from which we cannot return. In the act of seeking the answer, we are changed.

Our quest to find the answers to these questions will not be simple. To pursue them with honesty and valor will require the full strength of our vulnerability, the full power of our courage, the full force of our collaboration and our true willingness to lead and learn, compelling us to ask one further question.

How Will We Lead?

Our collective design community punches far above its weight, shaping the experiences of billions of people across the globe. And yet, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, *“Through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood and yet we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood.”*

We have tremendous access. We have remarkable privilege. Our individual and collective choices matter.

We are often more comfortable thinking about the built environment as a product of design, and less comfortable thinking about design as a cultural outcome – a series of decisions and actions that, intentionally or no, reflect the mores and values of our times.

- We must ask ourselves, who is in the room and who is missing?
- Who does our work privilege and who is left behind?
- Do we have the courage to decolonize design, radically expanding access to the tools and economic ecosystems of invention and creativity?
- Can we work from the premise that every life has equal value, extending this frame to include all life, not just human life, imagining technological pathways that will deliver our planet 7 generations forward to the next generation and beyond?
- Instead of seeking salvation from a singular leader, can we become instead a community of leaders, bound by the deep belief that together we stand stronger than we do apart?

Bringing this new future forward will require grit, determination and resolve.

It will require empathy.

It will require care.

It will require true leadership, in all its diversity.

It will require that where we have a wishbone, the backbone of our dreams is stronger still.

Can we bring this future forward?

If we can dream it, we can deliver it.

By Leading. **Together.**

Minka co-founder and CEO Ana Pinto da Silva drives transformational change at the intersection of housing, community and technology, leading with purpose, meaning & connection to create products that matter, defining new landscapes of opportunity for people world-wide with a special focus low/mid-income older adults and the creation of the intergenerational communities that help them thrive.

Ana is deeply committed to building equitable, diverse and inclusive communities of practice dedicated to courageous, future-forward innovation. She currently serves as [Innovator in Residence at Iowa State University](#), is the [founding co-chair of the Harvard GSD Impact Global Speaker Series](#) and is the founder of the [Seattle Pecha Kucha](#) speaker series, one of the longest running PK city series in the world. She currently serves on the board of directors for the [Harvard GSD Masters in Design Engineering](#) program, the [Harvard GSD Alumni Council](#), and [Leadership Tomorrow](#). Ana has served on the Board of Directors for [4Culture](#) and [Artist Trust](#), was past board Vice-President for [Design In Public](#) and has been an adviser to the [Seattle Waterfront Design Oversight Committee](#).