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**adaptive
thinking
for
creative
leadership**

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Several literatures have shown the necessity to envision design leadership as a strategy for the future of “advanced design” (Mozota, 2006), to anticipate the role of the designer as an “interpreter” who assumes an advocacy role (Buccolo et al., 2012) and to draft and promote design leadership as a competency at undergraduate and graduate levels (Baars & Rüedi, 2016) in order to new coaching strategies of leadership in design. The first steps towards developing design thinking for leadership are: firstly to understand the difference between “training” and “coaching” in design education, secondly acknowledging the responsibilities implied by the leadership role, and thirdly understanding design leadership as a capability that develops in time. In this context the mutated role of the design educator who “delivers” an educational content, to coach, or mentor who constructs the learning process by empowering the expert designers to make the most of their own leadership capabilities acquired through training, practiced skills and personal experience.

The future thinking for design leadership has to take into consideration three factors:

1. leadership thinking is not necessary accessible for all expert designers,
2. although the practical and professional skills are a necessary ingredient, design leadership thinking capabilities are mainly activated by the dedication to an ongoing learning and leading process,
3. this implies facing the uncertainty of the organisational systems, anticipating and inducing rather than reacting to, change opportunities.

The design thinking paradigm has recently shift from the domain of design discipline into an extensive range of interdisciplinary domains (Dorst, 2008). This role reflects first an increased need for innovative strategies within the organisations and secondly the relevance of design thinking skills that can support innovative change. The perception of designers as change makers and innovators, implies however more than acquiring managing skills, an overall ability to understand the nature of the organisational context, identifying the outdated meanings and values (Cooksey, 2003) and choosing the right metaphors that will enable the implementation of change.

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All the above bring forward the necessity to envision new training and coaching strategies that will acknowledge the emergence of leadership in design education. In order to attain a leadership mind frame it is necessary to look at the different expertise levels in design, asking how to coach expert designers to discover and achieve master and visionary capabilities (Dreyfuss, 2003). Starting from this assumption I first present the literature review focusing on the evolution of the design thinking and suggest several methods that can support design leadership coaching activities. Design thinking – The overview of the above studies indicates three interpretations of the design thinking concept: firstly as a problem – solving methodology refined through working experience and specific to the design discipline, secondly as a transferable approach which gradually became detached from the actual disciplinary field that generated it, and thirdly, as a reaction to the previous interpretation, as a intrinsically related to practice. If the first two interpretations design thinking relate to a problem solving approach, the third introduces a holistic perspective of thinking and practicing in design. This perspective indicates a change in the focus of the designer, from design thinking for problem solving to a holistic view of the overall design activity situated in the context of an overall system.

Design Leadership Mindframe

The capability of perceiving the overall system transforms isolated thinking into an expanded awareness of the self in relation to the organisation and therefore the readiness to act as a guide for the overall organisation. In this sense the design expert thinking transforms into an expanded leadership mind frame in which the practical expertise reinforces the leadership capabilities. In this concern, previous literatures have shown how design leaders have to encompass several core responsibilities in order to engage and guide. A conceptual framework that underlines the following core responsibilities of the design leaders: envisioning the future; manifesting strategic intent; directing design investment; creating and nurturing an environment of innovation. The methods were tested in the workshops IN & OUT, that internally we can rename as “Experiential learning model (ELM)” which involved young designers, mentors, professors, associations, owners and managers of different companies involved productively in the same territorial production chain, but with business needs and profiles varying from the complementariness of production and distribution to the complete overlap of processes and strategic visions. Looking at the different levels of expertise, connection, relationship involved in the “ELM”

that we could scientifically identify as a “Reference framework” of this ResearchAction; helps understanding why design leadership capabilities are showing, and can be better expressed, at advanced educational levels. As such, if up until the expert level the skill was strictly related to the in-depth comprehension of technical capabilities, at the master level the fully proficient expert is engendered with the capability to face adaptive challenges, questioning and criticising the previously acquired expertise in a constraint domain of practice. From this perspective coaching for design leadership shifts the educational objective from the transformation of knowledge into a design outcome, to the transfer of personal experience into the capability to be aware of the overall organisational system and anticipate its changes.

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Coaching for leadership

In this sense has to be seen not as an educational format but as a fluid activity that empowers the expert designers (and not only) to achieve a higher level of awareness and reach their own visionary potentialities. In this perspective, design thinking is re-integrated as one of the main competencies of the designers empowering them to claim leadership roles within organisations. The leadership mind frame has to be understood as having a double folded dimension in which leading and learning practices are always intertwined. The relevance of the adaptive learning and leading processes it is necessary to outline the nature of the organisational context and different levels at which it evolves; the “environment” outlines the area outside the organisation, in which the interests of different stakeholders, social and political actors influence the dynamic of the organisation; the “organisation” defines the overall features of the agency such as its history, structure and hierarchy, internal culture, resources and procedures; the “groups” refer to the formal and informal networks and communities of practice within the organisation, with their specific behavioral patterns and influences; finally each “individual” is seen with his/her capabilities,

personal resources, needs, weaknesses and emotional features (Cooksey, 2003, p. 205). In conclusion, starting from the integration of design thinking and design practice into the **Creative Leadership mind frame**, the “ELM” Experiential Learning Model as a possible approach for coaching design leaders. This position asks for a mutated awareness, which shifts from the individual focus to the overall acknowledgement of the organisational system and environment.

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