



THIS IS HUMAN CENTERED DESIGN

The book closes by returning to the sea metaphor: design as an ongoing voyage, not a destination. Readers are encouraged to continue navigating with the compass, charting new courses as conditions change. It leaves an open invitation to deepen practice through training, community, and lived experience. Returning to the sea metaphor: design as an ongoing voyage, not a destination. Readers are encouraged to continue navigating with the compass, charting new courses as conditions change. It leaves an open invitation to deepen practice through training, community, and lived experience.

“A brilliant, actionable guide that fundamentally changed how I view human-centered design. This book is essential reading for anyone looking to improve their services.”

“This book offers a profound, fresh perspective on productivity. It is both inspiring and deeply practical.”

Name Surname
Position, Organisation

Name Surname
Position, Organisation

*A Practical Guide
to Designing Better Services,
Systems, and Experiences*

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***THIS IS
HUMAN
CENTERED
DESIGN***

DRAFT

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Fig. 1. Photo taken from Human Centered Design workshop, Digital Government Authority, 2024, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Credit: Humana Design Limited.

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INTRODUCTION

THIS IS HUMAN CENTERED DESIGN

*Practical Guide to Designing Better Services, Systems, and Experiences.
The What. The How. The Why.*

- *This is Human Centered Design* cuts through the jargon and hype to offer a clear, honest guide to what Human Centered Design really is, how to practise it with integrity, and why it matters in today's complex world. It gives readers practical models for navigating ambiguity, tools for aligning principles with action, and renewed confidence in designing with purpose.

The book is structured around ten foundational principles, from mindsets and inclusion to systems thinking, power and participation, and trust and transparency, each explored through reflective stories, exercises, and case studies drawn from practice. Together, these chapters help readers build both personal and organisational capability to design with humility, clarity, and impact.

Drawing on conversations with hundreds of practitioners, from emerging designers to seasoned leaders shaping systems, the book blends reflection with practice, making it both a compass for orientation and a toolkit for lasting change.

FOREWORD

MARC STICKDORN

- Think about the last time a service treated you like a person. Not a case number, not a ticket in a queue, not a waiting number in an IVR, but a person with a name, a bad morning, and a reason for being there. Think about how rare that felt. And think about how well you still remember it.

Now think about everyone who shaped that moment. The policy-maker who set the rule years ago. The manager who signed off the budget. The developer who built the form. The person on the phone who, in the space of a sentence, decided to be kind. Most of them never met you. Most of them never thought of themselves as designing for your experience at all. And yet, between them, they designed it.

The reality is that too few of them were paying attention to the human at the centre. People do not care who designed a service, or what it was called, or which framework produced it. They care how they get treated.

For many years, some of us have argued that services must be consciously designed rather than left to accident. I started teaching service design at a business school in 2008, co-authored some of the seminal books in the field, like 'This Is Service Design Thinking' (2010) and 'This Is Service Design Doing' (2018), and taught thousands in service design from high-school students to high-school teachers, BA, MA, and PhD students, managers and executives. In less than two decades, we have come a long way: from making the case that design matters, to arguing about how to scale it across whole organisations. This book takes on the harder question that underpins both. Not how to prove the value of design, or even how to scale it, but how to keep it human. How to support the people who do the work, so they can keep doing it.

That is the gap Gerry Scullion fills. Human-centred design has never been short of principles. Posters, manifestos and neat diagrams are everywhere. What has been missing is a grounded, practical perspective. One that admits the work is messy, political, and quietly costly to the person doing it. The ten principles at the heart of this book are offered in exactly that spirit: practical guidance to return to whenever the work becomes difficult.

I have watched Gerry earn the right to write this. For more than a decade, we've exchanged ideas, challenged each other's thinking, and had countless conversations. Some became episodes of the This is HCD podcast. Others shaped the client work we delivered together around the world. What strikes me most is his honesty, his openness, and ultimately, his willingness to be vulnerable. He is willing to talk about the failures, the projects that stalled, the politics that closed in, and the toll the work takes on the people who care about it most. Very few books in this field are brave enough to do that.

This book bridges theory and action, and it does not pretend the passage between them is clean. It grounds itself in real, named practitioners and real stories, rather than in the abstractions we so often hide behind. That is why this book will become a must-read for the human-centred design community. But it is also for everyone who shapes services, consciously or unconsciously: managers, developers, policymakers, and the people on the phone, in the shop, behind a computer. If that is you, this book was written for you.

Gerry describes human-centred design not as a destination but as a life-long act of navigation, and I think that is exactly right. This book should not be read as the last word on how to practise it. It is a compass, and a good one, for a voyage that is never quite finished.

- Dr. Marc Stickdorn

FOREWORD

ADRIENNE TAN

- This book is timely.

In a world obsessed with technology and gadgetry, the focus on human experience, both as a maker and as a consumer, is exactly what's needed right now. Humans bring humanity to the products and services we craft, and traits like humility, learning and curiosity simply can't be replicated by technology. This book is a reminder to be human at work. To forgo the toxic environments, we sometimes find ourselves in, and to stop building products and services that don't serve the people they're meant for. Whatever your title in the business, product manager, engineer, service designer, this book will guide you through your day-to-day work and put your humanity back at the centre of it.

I first met Gerry over a decent cup of coffee in an alleyway in Sydney. You don't often meet the yin to your yang, but that's what he was. I was drawn to his generosity, generous of spirit, of care, and of love. I'm a product person by profession, and as a service designer, Gerry brought a different perspective to the work we did together.

I remember facilitating a journey mapping workshop with him for a fintech company, and it's a good example of what I mean by empathy in practice. He'd printed the journey maps so large they filled the walls, and had everyone walk the wall, stepping through the experience rather than just looking at it on a page. He brought the different actors into the room, thinking through their experiences and needs, while I was thinking about the business side, how we'd commercialise what came out of the workshop. It's the coupling of those two viewpoints, the human need and the commercial reality, that makes products and services deliver for both the business and the customer.

Gerry has since gone on to do bigger things, bringing the world of product makers together in a way few others have.

I think every product, design and engineering professional should keep this book close, as a reference for what it takes to build products and services that are truly human.

- Adrienne Tan

- Every book like this starts the same way: with a story about how the world is changing at an incredible rate, and how you need to act now or settle for being second best.

I struggle with that narrative. The whole “move fast and break things” mentality. Break what exactly? Products? Processes? People? More often than not, it is the people who get broken first, not physically but mentally.

That mindset is insufferable, and it is a by-product of a culture obsessed with scale and growth that emanates from the technology businesses of yesteryear.

Much of my work as a design practitioner is about leaving an organisation in a better place than I found it: designing better systems and the processes around them. Yet time and again, I see organisations racing ahead to create something new without ever pausing to ask why their past deliverables failed. Each project is an opportunity to improve how we work, but many teams are under immense pressure to deliver anything, even if it is bad.

That is not good design. That is not good business.

This is why this book exists. I have seen firsthand how brutal the world of innovation can be on people inside organisations. We once pointed to lawyers as the archetype of burnout, but I believe there is growing evidence that designers, innovators, and changemakers are working in equally unsustainable ways. This book is about slowing down, re-aligning, and navigating differently. It is about finding a compass for the practitioner and giving them the tools to move the dial within their organisations, not to move faster, but to move more wisely and with intent.

I grew up in Drogheda, a small town in Ireland roughly equidistant between Dublin, our capital, and the border with the North of Ireland. Something not many people know is that I was dangerously sick as a newborn, with a heart condition.

Shortly after my birth, as my mother recovered in the ward, a nurse heard what she later described as a “cry above all other cries” and intervened. Within hours, I was whisked away alone to Crumlin Children’s Hospital in

Dublin, fighting for my life.

As luck would have it, when I arrived, parentless and only hours old, a doctor named Desmond Duff happened to be on duty. He recognised my surname, which derives from an area in south Derry, the same area that Desmond was from. Desmond took an immediate interest and treated me in the days and weeks that followed. I was baptised in an incubator, and somehow I survived.

Why am I sharing this? Because it illustrates a truth at the heart of this book: services are delivered whether they are designed or not. Nothing about what happened to me was planned or orchestrated. No designer or strategist would ever map out that experience and nod approvingly as if it were acceptable.

Human intervention saved the day. A nurse heard my cry and acted. An ambulance driver carried me to the next stage. Dr Duff carried me through the critical hours that followed. That chain of human responses made survival possible.

The design of the service was absent. The humanity within it was not.

I believe humans are inherently good, and that is one of the key aspects of a strong Human Centered Design practitioner. We believe in the possible.

Across years of researching some of the most complex situations I can imagine, I have noticed the same story surface again and again: people succeed because of other people. More often than not, it is not because of technology. **Technology can enable, but historically, we have overestimated its capability and underestimated the power of humans to navigate, adapt, and overcome complexity.**

This book aims to tap into the power that both bring to the table and to re-establish a framework in which the two can co-exist.

NAVIGATING THE SEAS OF DESIGN

- I still remember the first time I heard the phrase Human Centered Design.

It was while studying industrial design, and I remember thinking: “You put the human at the centre? The centre of what exactly?”

It sounded nice, almost poetic, but it did not make sense to me. I nodded along in lectures, pretending I understood, but truthfully, I did not. It seemed vague and overly idealistic. Surely all design was about people, was it not? It took me years, decades really, to understand that what we were talking about was not where to put the human, but how to orient ourselves around them. If you are reading this and feel unsure what Human Centered Design really means, I have been there, too. The confusion, the questioning, the sense of being outside the conversation. But that is where learning begins.

In this book, I want to share everything I have learned since I qualified as a designer in 2002, across practice, research, and teaching: what I got right, what I got wrong, and the mindsets that changed how I see the work.

The Blister Pack

My first professional job was designing packaging, a blister pack for four AA batteries. It was the sort of project many young designers start with: small, tidy, and supposedly harmless. I remember being proud to be trusted with it. I spent days refining the curves, the way the plastic folded, and the product’s visibility through the transparent shell.

Then, one afternoon, as I stared at the prototype, it hit me. This thing I had spent weeks designing was destined to live for maybe five seconds in the customer’s hands. Someone would rip it open, grab the batteries, and throw it in the bin. Landfill. Gone.

It was such a mundane realisation, but it landed hard. My first professional output was, quite literally, waste. That was the moment I began to question what we were really doing as designers. Were we designing for people, or for profit? This was my first job, my very first steps as a professional designer, and I felt utterly powerless to raise it as a concern with my boss. Maybe there were

other ideas we could try to make it work, for longevity rather than obsolescence. That tiny blister pack became my first real education in systems, even if I did not yet have the language for it.

I began to notice the absence of intent all around me: products designed to deceive, marketing that overpromised, experiences that ended in frustration. It was designed for performance, not for service. Design that solved short-term business problems at the cost of long-term human ones.

Looking back, that moment was my first taste of what Human Centered Design eventually became for me: a discipline that demands we look beyond the object, beyond the transaction, and ask who benefits, who pays the cost, and what remains when we are gone.

The Realisation

Years later, I found myself working in a completely different context, public services. I was part of a team trying to improve how vulnerable people accessed support. It was not glamorous, there were no fancy prototypes or slick interfaces, but the work was human in the truest sense.

At one point, we were reviewing a simple process: how a call centre operator followed up after speaking with someone in distress. The proposed change was hardly revolutionary, a short standard operating procedure to guide those calls. But I remember watching the impact it had. A few extra prompts, a different tone of voice, a follow-up question, and suddenly the person on the other end of the line felt seen, not processed.

It was in that moment that I finally understood what Human Centered Design meant. It was not about making things prettier or faster. It was about caring. About building systems where care could scale without losing its humanity.

Up until then, my career had been driven by features and outputs, software releases, interfaces, products. Working alongside psychologists, social workers, and frontline staff showed me something deeper: that design is not the domain of the expert, it is a conversation between disciplines. For years I had avoided those conversations because I did not feel qualified to have them. I thought my design education was not enough to speak about trauma, policy, or organisational change.

But learning to research, really research, to listen without agenda, changed everything. I learned to see patterns in stories, not just in data. I learned to design with people rather than for them. Slowly, I learned to see myself not as a problem-solver but as a connector, someone who helps others find clarity in the fog. That is what Human Centered Design is to me now: a practice of connection.

The Necessity of Discomfort

Design, when done honestly, is uncomfortable work. It forces us to sit with

questions that do not have easy answers. Most organisations dislike that. They prefer certainty, clear metrics, timelines, deliverables. But the world rarely behaves that neatly.

In my early years, I thought being good at design meant having all the answers. Now I know it means holding space for not knowing. Real design work starts at the edge of clarity, where things get fuzzy, contradictory, and human.

When you start to work this way, discomfort becomes familiar. You realise that ambiguity is not a sign of failure, it is a sign you are doing something worthwhile. The trick is not to eliminate uncertainty, but to learn to navigate through it, to use curiosity as your compass and experimentation as your sail.

This mindset helps us design better and live better, because life, too, is full of prototypes.

Learning Through Failure

People sometimes assume that because I have worked in design for decades, I must be confident all the time. The truth is, I have failed more than I have succeeded. I have led workshops that fell flat, projects that lost funding, and research studies that yielded no clear insight.

But those failures taught me more than any polished success story ever could. They taught me humility, to ask better questions, and that progress in design often looks like standing still: pausing, reflecting, and seeing what you missed.

Early in my consulting career, I ran a service redesign project to improve an internal process. I pushed too hard, too fast. I wanted to prove design's value, to make an impact. But I did not listen enough. Months later, when the prototype went live, it quietly failed. The people who had to use it had not been involved. I had been so busy "leading change" that I forgot to walk alongside them.

That failure stayed with me. It made me gentler, slower, and far more aware of the quiet politics of design, the invisible systems that hold people in place.

Failure, I have learned, is not a detour. It is the path itself.

The Mindset Shift

As my understanding deepened, I realised that practising Human Centered Design is not about collecting tools or frameworks. **It is about cultivating a mindset, a way of seeing and being in the world.** Over time, I began to notice three qualities that anchor this mindset: humility, learning, and curiosity.

Humility

Humility is design's quiet strength. It is the recognition that we are never the smartest person in the room, and that expertise without empathy can be dangerous. I have seen too many design leaders fall into the trap of believing

they "know better." The best ones do not. They listen better.

Humility also means acknowledging what you do not know, and creating the conditions for others to teach you. Some of the best ideas I have seen have come not from designers, but from frontline workers, call-centre staff, and citizens themselves.

Learning

If humility grounds us, learning propels us. Human Centered Design is a continuous education in being human. Every project, every interview, every failed prototype adds to your intuition.

But learning requires reflection. It means resisting the urge to jump straight from insight to action. It means pausing long enough to ask, "What am I really seeing here?" and "How might my own bias be shaping what I notice?"

The best designers I know are deliberate learners. They do not just absorb information, they metabolise it.

Curiosity

Curiosity is the lifeblood of our work. It keeps us from settling for surface-level answers, turns interviews into relationships, and turns workshops into revelations.

To be curious is to remain open, to resist cynicism even when the system feels broken. It is not naïve optimism; it is courageous inquiry.

In the end, curiosity connects humility and learning. Without it, we stagnate. With it, we grow.

Resilience and Openness

Design does not happen in isolation. It happens inside systems that resist change, organisations built on control, speed, and certainty. Trying to bring a human centered approach into those environments can be exhausting.

That is why resilience matters. Resilience is not about pushing through at all costs. It is about recovering well, knowing when to step back, when to ask for help, and when to rest.

Over the years, I have learned that my own resilience depends on connection. Community, reflection, and shared practice keep me grounded. Whether it is debriefing with a colleague after a tough research session or sharing stories in the This is HCD community, those moments remind me that I am not alone.

Openness sits alongside resilience. The more open we are to feedback, vulnerability, and imperfection, the more we create the psychological safety that design requires. Teams work faster when they feel safe slowing down. They take smarter risks when they know mistakes are survivable.

Vulnerability is not weakness. It is the soil where trust grows. And trust, more than process or technology, is what makes good design possible.

The Compass Within

Looking back now, every stage of my journey, confusion, failure, discovery, and growth, feels like part of a larger voyage. The tools and frameworks came and went, but what stayed were the bearings I learned to trust.

When the seas get rough, I return to them:

- Humility keeps me steady.
- Learning keeps me moving.
- Curiosity keeps me alive to possibilities.
- Resilience helps me weather the storms.
- Openness helps me travel with others.

These five are personal, the bearings that kept me steady through my own voyage. The book itself is built on a larger compass: the ten principles of Human Centered Design that make up Module 1. They are where we turn next.

Human Centered Design is not a destination. It is a lifelong act of navigation.

MODULE A SETTING THE COMPASS

Ten Principles of Human-Centred Design

Every voyage begins by setting the compass. Before you touch a service, you orient yourself around the values, mindsets and behaviours that meaningful design rests on. Human Centered Design is not a toolkit or a tidy process. It is a way of thinking that holds empathy and rigour together, creativity and accountability, your own intention and its effect on others. Each of these ten principles is a shift in how you see the work. Setting your compass is not a one-time exercise; it is a practice you return to.

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PRINCIPLE #01

MINDSETS & PRINCIPLES

Moving into a Way of Thinking and Being

What Meaningful Work Actually Is

- Bringing meaning to your work, your life, and your business builds a reservoir of resilience you can draw on when things get hard: when ambiguity feels endless, when people misunderstand your ideas, when the system resists change. This is the well that you can draw from time and time again.

I hear the same question from people in corporate environments all the time. “Should I quit my job and go work for an NGO instead?” My answer is always the same. It depends. You can create meaningful work not by changing sectors but by bringing intent to what you already do. It is not about **who you work for**. It is about **how you work**.

Misaligned, rigid systems need people who can humanise them from within, hold space for better questions, and create small shifts that ripple outward. That work is slow and often invisible, and it matters deeply. So quite often there are opportunities for many people who want to practice Human Centered Design as a mindset within their current roles.

To bring meaning into your work, connect three things: your purpose, your practice, and your presence.

Purpose is the ‘why’ – the deeper motivation behind your contribution.

If you are unsure how to answer, connect with the people who use your services. Listening to how they experience what your organisation produces is a leveller. It reminds you why the work exists.

Practice is the ‘how’ – the craft, rigour, and methods you use.

If your craft feels stagnant, look for chances to teach. Teaching forces you to simplify and articulate your thinking, and it reconnects you with the curiosity that brought you into this work.

Presence is the ‘who’ – the awareness you bring to each conversation and decision.

Before a meeting, slow down and notice what you are bringing into the room: your mood, your assumptions, your energy. Presence is not performing calm. It is showing up consciously, ready to listen and adapt.

When the three line up, the shifts are subtle. Meetings feel less performative. Research feels more like listening than extracting. Design feels less about deliverables and more about stewardship.

I first felt all three of these align whilst working for Cochlear in Australia. They are a remarkable company that offers hearing solutions for the profoundly deaf. I knew **why I was there**. I knew **what value I could deliver** using design methods. I knew who we were designing services for. Up until this point in my career, I struggled to answer all three of these questions with conviction and certainty.

Staying Open When the System Pushes Back

That feeling, knowing your work makes a real difference to people, is addictive. But the work that creates it rarely arrives with any fanfare. More often, there is no design ops, no clear process, just uncertainty. That is the environment I learned in. I experimented, I failed often, and I built trust through honest conversations. The work was hard, and that is exactly where design grows.

A few things help me stay open when the system resists:

Get out of the office.

Fresh air and perspective are underrated tools for creative resilience. Step away from the noise and let new ideas in. I've consciously developed this practice over the years with the help of Mike Parker.

Curate a space internally.

Even a small corner – physical or digital – where people can share ideas, wins, and reflections makes a huge difference. Optimism needs room to breathe. You'll almost always have to fight for this space in many organisations that don't value our working methods. Start small, and don't give up.

Walk the walk.

Hold firm to the principles of human-centred design. Keep learning and building ethically sound decision-making processes, even when difficult.

Stay in control of the work.

Especially if you're a team of one, define your boundaries and stay connected to why you're doing this. It's easy to overwork to prove your value within systems overloaded with poor practices - but in my experience, no one wins that way.

Find your allies.

Seek out the people who are curious about design. They might not call themselves designers, but connecting them creates real momentum.

That is what disciplined optimism looks like. It is not naïve positivity. It is grounded hope, saying “I don't know yet” and trusting that is enough to begin.

PRINCIPLE #02 INCLUSION & EQUITY

Design With, Not For

We are Humans First, And Designers Second

- We believe in the power of our craft, in the processes and rituals that help us do good work. Yet too often design does the opposite, excluding or marginalising the very people it claims to serve. Many design frameworks, Human Centered Design included, were built inside systems that prized efficiency and universality over equity and representation. This principle is a correction. It pulls us back to what is right for the people we serve: it moves us from designing for them to designing with them, and treats inclusion and equity as the foundation of the work, not an afterthought.

In Australia, once we widened who we included in our research, we heard something I have not forgotten. Government letters telling people to attend court were going out in English, to people who could not read or speak English. The job of reading a court summons and explaining it fell to their children, born in Australia and fluent, because the service could only work in one language.

The Crisis of the Average User

For decades, design has centred on the mythical average user. The average person does not exist. I am, like most people, a blend of so-called average needs and several extreme ones. When we design for averages, we exclude the people at the margins.

Globally, around 16 per cent of people, some 1.3 billion, live with a significant disability (Reference 1.1). Add temporary and situational needs, carrying a child, recovering from an injury, feeling anxious in a stressful environment, and a great many of us hit a wall at some point because of how something was designed. These are not edge cases. They are the human condition.

Inclusion is not about being nice. It is about designing systems that work for the world as it actually is. The more perspectives we build in, the more resilient and adaptable the result.

Inclusion is Not Equity

These two words get used interchangeably, and they should not be. Inclusion means people can get in and take part. Equity goes further. It accepts that people do not start from the same place and adjusts the system to level the playing field.

In Ireland, the only way to find out if you were eligible for social housing was to phone a line open during business hours. One person I met worked in a creche with a thirty-minute lunch, too noisy to call from, and by the time they found somewhere quiet, the line had shut for its own lunch. Anyone could phone. That is not the same as everyone being able to.

We also have to face our own bias, ableism included. It rarely arrives as hostility. It hides in everyday assumptions about what a normal body or mind should be able to do. Unlearning it takes humility and steady attention to how we speak, design, and decide.

Designing With Means Sharing Power

The shift from designing for to designing with is one of the most profound a designer can make. Designing for leans on reports, personas, and assumptions. Designing with means sharing power, co-creating, and letting go of control. You enter a community as a guest, not a saviour, and you accept that people are the experts in their own lives.

In public and social-sector work, trust is earned slowly. Communities that have been ignored or misrepresented have every reason to be sceptical. Many have met designers before who promised the sun, moon, and stars and then changed nothing. Your job is to listen more than you speak, to build relationships that outlast the project, and to be honest about the power you hold simply by being the designer in the room.

Lived experience is expertise. People who navigate barriers every day are often the most inventive problem solvers you will meet. As Lesley-Ann Noel puts it, design is political. Treat participation as a box to tick and it becomes theatre. Treat it as real and it changes the outcome.

Build Equity In, Do Not Bolt It On

Retrofitting accessibility at the end is expensive and, worse, it is unethical. Equity has to be there from the start: in who you recruit, who you research with, who tests the thing, and who is in the room when decisions get made.

Design for the stress cases too, the moments when people are under pressure, grieving, or afraid. Systems tend to fail exactly then, and that is where the absence of equity shows.

Language carries this work. The words we choose either reinforce exclusion or invite belonging. Saying “a person who uses a wheelchair” rather than “confined to a wheelchair” signals a shift in dignity and agency. Language is

never neutral.

Accountability holds it all together. Test with diverse groups. Invite critique from the people your organisation has historically left out. Review outcomes for fairness, not just function. Equity is not a one-time audit. It is a discipline.

Closing

Inclusion and equity are not boxes to tick. They are a way of working. Designing with communities means listening, sharing power, and letting the process change you. It is slower. It is also richer, more human, and more durable.

Probing reflective questions for you to unpack this principle

- 1 Who is the “average user” your current service is built around, and who does that average quietly leave out?
- 2 Where in your service is access equal on paper, but the outcome is still unfair, because people do not arrive from the same place?
- 3 When did you last change your mind, or your design, because of something a person with lived experience told you that you could never have known yourself?
- 4 Is accessibility something you build in from the start, or something you bolt on near the end? What would it take to move it earlier?
- 5 Who has your organisation historically left out, and how could you invite those people to critique your work rather than simply receive it?

1.1 World Health Organisation, *Global report on health equity for persons with disabilities* (2022).

PRINCIPLE #03 EMOTIONS & HUMANITY

Design for How People Feel

- Human Centered Design is not just about function. It is about how people feel and how the outputs of your work impact them. This is the most personal of the ten principles, because it asks us to bring our full humanity into professional spaces that have been trained to keep emotion at arm's length.

We talk about user needs, pain points, and journeys, but beneath every data point is a person feeling something real: confusion, hope, grief, relief, frustration, joy. If we are not designing for those emotions, we are not designing for humans.

Empathy Is A Practice, Not A Performance

Empathy is the most misunderstood word in design. It has been reduced to a stage in a process, a sticky-note exercise, a workshop warm-up. Real empathy is not something you perform in a double diamond. It is something you practise, often uncomfortably, over time. It means sitting with experiences that are not your own and resisting the urge to fix, reframe, or categorise them. It means leaning into ways of work that may feel counter-intuitive in corporate environments: slow and intentional work.

It also has limits. The emotional labour of research in health, justice, and social care takes a real toll. I have seen researchers carry stories home for weeks, and teams burn out because no one asked how they were doing after intense fieldwork. **Empathy practised without boundaries becomes self-harm.** The discipline is knowing when to lean in and when to step back.

! Hot Tip

In sensitive research, build debrief rituals into your practice and intentional systems of care. Not just retrospectives about the process, but genuine check-ins about how the team is feeling and discuss the stories that are being heard. This is not soft. It is essential infrastructure for sustainable, ethical work.

Dignity Is A Design Outcome

Dignity is not a feature you add at the end. It is the foundation every interaction stands on. When someone contacts a government service while griev-

ing, navigates a health system while frightened, or applies for support while ashamed, the experience either affirms or erodes their sense of self-worth. Too often, services are built around operational efficiency instead. Forms ask for information that people already gave. Processes assume the worst. Language is clinical or patronising. Each one sends a quiet message: **you are a case to be managed, not a person to be respected.**

Designing for dignity means asking different questions at the start. Not just “what does the user need to do?” but “how do we want people to feel as they move through this?” Not just “is this efficient?” but “is this kind?”

As I write this book, I often reflect on the story of Allen Bobinac. Allen grew up on the island of Krk, off the coast of Croatia, in what he calls a broken home, alongside his twin brother Jay, with few prospects once school was finished. He came to Dublin looking for something better, and for a long time what he found was the street. He slept rough in St Stephen’s Green, in the middle of the city, the same green where this conversation began.

What helped Allen turn the corner was not a programme; it was a person. He met Senator Aubrey McCarthy, the founder of Tiglin, and Tiglin’s long, patient, community-centred approach to addiction, trauma and homelessness gave Allen a way back. Up until recently, he managed The Lighthouse Café on Pearse Street, one of the most compassionate homelessness services in Ireland: a place that offers food and shelter but, really, deals in warmth, sanctuary and belonging.

That journey, from the Green to running the service, is the whole point. Allen knows these systems from the receiving end, not from a research deck. So when he talks about dignity being stripped away by the very services meant to help, he is not theorising. He has stood in the queue. He has what we refer to within Human Centered Design as “lived experience”.

It is also why his work is the clearest example of designing for dignity I know. In homelessness and addiction services, people have usually had their dignity worn away long before they reach the door. Designing for it meant rethinking everything: the physical environment, the language staff use, the intake process, and the way data is collected and shared. It meant treating people as whole human beings rather than problems to be processed. None of that is soft. It is the difference between a service that helps someone rebuild and one that quietly confirms they do not belong. Allen had been on both sides of that difference, which is exactly why his services get it right.

! Hot Tip

Walk through your own service as if you were having your worst day, not your average one. Grieving, exhausted, confused, afraid. If it still feels respectful and navigable under those conditions, you are designing for dignity. If it does not, that is where the work begins.

Trust, Connection, And Emotional Courage

Trust is the foundation beneath both empathy and dignity. It is not built through polished presentation decks. It is built through consistency, honesty, and the willingness to say “I don’t know yet”: following through on a commitment, sharing credit, admitting a mistake before someone else points it out. In my own work, the projects where trust was strongest were also the most impactful, because trust made honesty possible, and **honesty is the raw material of good design.**

Design can also be a source of quiet joy. Not the staged delight of an awards show, but the smaller kind: the relief of a process that works as promised, an interaction that leaves you better than it found you. These moments are not accidents. They are designed. And in an age of isolation, designing for that kind of connection is not a luxury. It is the point.

All of this asks for emotional courage. The willingness to stay curious in the fog, to resist the easy answer, to care about outcomes no dashboard will ever show. It is quiet work. It shows up in the designer who pushes back when a deadline threatens the research, the researcher who stops an interview because the participant is distressed, the leader who slows the whole thing down because the team has not yet earned a community’s trust. **That is what separates design that looks good from design that does good.**

Probing Reflective Questions For You to Unpack this Principle

- 1 Do the experiences you design leave people feeling seen, safe, and respected? And how would you actually know?
- 2 Where could you bring more dignity, empathy, or even joy into your current work without waiting for permission?
- 3 Where is trust doing the quiet work in your projects right now, and where is its absence slowing everything down?
- 4 When did you last genuinely check on your team’s wellbeing after a hard research session? Not the project’s health, theirs. A passing “all okay?” on the way out the door does not count; it only ever earns you a “fine.” I mean making real space for what they carried out of that room, and being ready to hear that the answer is not fine.
- 5 What would change tomorrow if you treated how people feel as a primary design outcome, rather than an afterthought?

PRINCIPLE #04 SYSTEMS & STRUCTURES

Design the System, Not Just the Thing

- Every design decision sends ripples through a wider system. A new form eases pressure for one group and adds workload to another. A better onboarding flow helps some people and quietly locks others out. Nothing exists on its own, and this is the principle that separates designers **who make things** from designers **who make change**.

I learned this the hard way. Early on, I would solve the need right in front of me and only discover later that I had created friction somewhere else. How? I had followed the brief exactly as it was given to me.

A financial client wanted their application form made as simple as possible, and that is what the previous redesign had set out to do. It passed its usability tests. But when we looked at what happened after the form was submitted, the picture changed: the simpler form had buried the back office in incomplete submissions, which came back as a tidal wave of emails and calls from confused customers. The form tested well in the room and failed in the system around it.

It is a pattern I have seen again and again. A new digital channel improves access for some people while quietly starving the phone line the most vulnerable depend on. A change that looks like a clean win at one touchpoint creates a hidden cost at another. The work is not just designing the thing in front of you. It is seeing the system it lands in.

Over time I saw that the real work was not the artefact. It was the structure around it: the incentives, the politics, the handoffs, the forgotten parts of the organisation that shape every service decision. Systems thinking is what lets you slow down and ask the harder questions. Who holds power here? Who benefits if this changes? Who feels the impact in ways I cannot see yet?

Interventions Have Consequences You Cannot See

A change in one part of a system almost always produces effects in another, often delayed and invisible to the team that made it. This is not an argument against action. It is an argument for humility. When you accept that your

interventions will have consequences you cannot fully foresee, you design differently. You build in feedback loops. You stay close to the people affected and listen for the signal that something is shifting.

Follow the Pain, Map the Relationships

Where people consistently struggle, there is usually a structural cause beneath the surface. A confusing form is rarely just a content problem. It is often a symptom of misaligned policy, competing priorities, or inherited process no one has questioned in years. The most effective systems thinkers I have worked with are not the ones with the most sophisticated maps. They are the ones who ask the most uncomfortable questions: why does this process exist, who does it serve, what happens if we remove it?

And power sits in relationships, not org charts. As Kim Goodwin's work on decision systems shows, the formal chart rarely tells you how decisions actually get made.

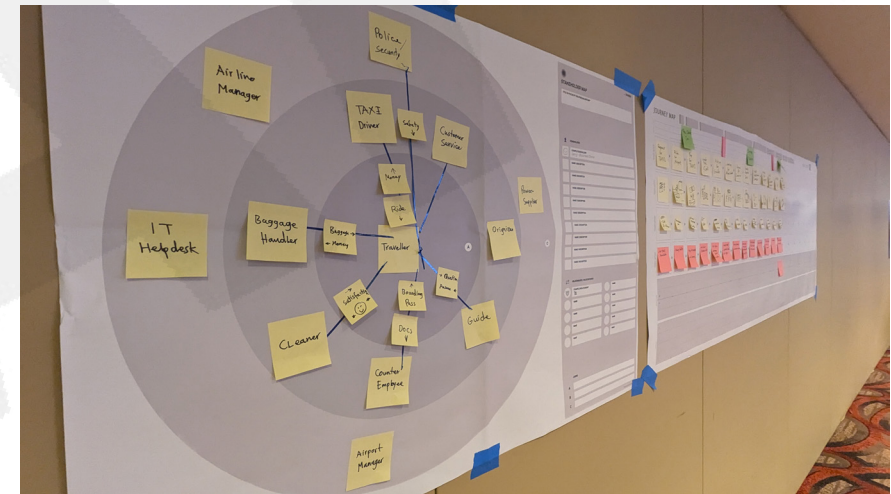


Fig. 1. Photo taken from Human Centered Design workshop, Digital Government Authority, 2024, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Credit: Humana Design Limited.

Influence flows through trust and history. A project can have perfect research and compelling evidence and still stall if it has not navigated the relational landscape of the organisation.

The map above is a snapshot of everyone involved in delivering the land-side experience for business travellers: the airline manager, the baggage handler, the taxi driver, the cleaner, the IT helpdesk, all of them. Maps like this matter not just because they show who does what, but because they reveal the relationships between those people, which is where the real influence, and the real friction, live.

Design for Resilience

Systems shift. Budgets, leadership, policy, and people all change. **Designing for the perfect state produces solutions that crack the moment that conditions move.** Designing for resilience means building in flexibility and resisting the urge to over-specify. When teams see the bigger picture together, alignment becomes less about consensus and more about a shared view. You do not need everyone to agree on the solution. You need everyone to see the same system. We will cover more of this in the following chapters, namely Service Architecture.

Probing Reflective Questions For You to Unpack this Principle

- 1 When have you discovered the system behind the problem you were trying to solve, and what changed as a result?
- 2 What helped you see beyond the immediate task or project to the wider structures at play?
- 4 How do you bring others along when the picture gets complex and the path forward is unclear?
- 5 Where in your current work might you be solving a symptom while leaving the underlying structure untouched?
- 6 What relationships in your organisation quietly shape the outcomes of your design work, and how well do you understand them?

PRINCIPLE #05 PROCESS & PRACTICE

Practise, Do Not Just Process

- Process is where principles become action, but process is never the point. What matters is the rhythm of learning inside it. The most effective design work does not follow a neat, linear sequence. It lives in the messy middle, between thinking and doing, and the teams I admire move fluidly between structure and improvisation.

The Leap of Faith, And Thinking Through Doing

Frank Long once described design as a leap of faith: you follow a process, but inside it there are moments where you do not know what will happen. Those moments used to unsettle me. Now I see them as the heart of the work. They force you to let go of the idea that you can think your way to certainty. You move, you test, you listen, and the path reveals itself.

This runs against how most organisations operate. They are built for predictability and reward certainty, clear timelines, measurable outputs. Design done with integrity asks us to hold space for not knowing. Most of the real thinking happens while you are doing, not in the upfront planning or the final decks. It surfaces when the team is sketching, trying things, and being honest about what is not landing. The teams that make the most progress are the ones that spend the most time in that raw, unfinished space.

! Hot Tip

If your process feels like a series of handoffs between stages, introduce a weekly session where everyone works together on something unfinished. No presentations, no polish. The quality of your thinking improves because the quality of your conversations improves.

Rituals, or Theatre

Sarah Drummond has challenged designers to ask whether their rituals serve the work or just perform it. It is easy to get so absorbed in the mechanics, the workshops, the post-its, the activities, that you start performing the work rather than doing it. We mistake movement for progress. The industry has built an impressive toolkit, and that toolkit can become a comfort blanket: when we feel uncertain, we reach for a familiar activity instead of asking whether it is helping us learn. The discipline is knowing when a workshop is genuinely useful and when it is just something to do.

A Practice, Not a Process

A process tells you what to do next. A practice asks you to pay attention to what is actually happening. The best work I have been part of always had a plan held lightly, a team attentive to signals, and the trust to follow something unexpected when it emerged. That responsiveness is what turns insight into impact.

A few things keep me grounded: start small and test early; move between thinking and doing, because they feed each other; keep rituals light and let go of the ones that have lost their purpose; and keep people close to the learning, because that is where alignment and trust grow.

Probing Reflective Questions For You to Unpack this Principle

- 1 What helps you stay open when the work becomes uncertain, and what causes you to reach for false certainty?
- 2 How do you maintain momentum without over-structuring everything?
- 3 Where have you seen small experiments lead to bigger shifts, and what made those experiments possible?
- 4 Which rituals in your current practice genuinely serve the work, and which ones have become habitual without adding value?
- 5 How often does your team work together in the unfinished, fragile space where real learning happens?

PRINCIPLE #06 POWER & PARTICIPATION

Share the Power

- Power is always present in design, whether we acknowledge it or not. It is rarely the dramatic kind. More often it is a quiet undercurrent, deciding who gets invited in, who is listened to, who is protected, and who is politely left out. Participation bends around that current, and once you have seen it, you cannot unsee it.

It is worth saying plainly, because early readers of this book kept assuming otherwise: power is not the villain here. Several of them read the word as inherently bad. It is not. Power is neutral. What matters is whether it is examined or hidden, shared or hoarded, and whether the system around it understands how and when to use it. Badly held power does harm. Well-held power is how good things actually get done.

The Designer's Strange Position

Designers rarely hold formal authority, yet the simple act of listening to people and framing their stories shifts the system. André Schaminée put it well: a designer holds no position of power, and yet exercises a great deal of it, because going out and speaking to people interferes with the forcefield that keeps a problem in place. That idea of a forcefield explains much of the pushback teams feel. Shine a light in one direction and another part of the system throws a shadow. People do not like to lose power, and that is the real backdrop to participation. It is not a technique. It is a negotiation over where power sits, and where it is allowed to move.

Genuine Versus Symbolic Participation

The simplest test of whether participation is real is this: are people actually sharing power, or not? When they are not, participation becomes theatre.

People are consulted but not heard, their input gathered but never used. Organisations pour resources into workshops and advisory panels after the decisions have already been made. The harm is not just the wasted time. It erodes the very trust that future participation depends on.

I learned this the hard way. On a project years ago, I was overwhelmed trying to understand the problem. The more I looked, the more it seemed to multiply, and I felt like I was going in circles. Looking back, I can see what I was really doing: I was holding on to power. I was waiting until I had enough clarity to move, keeping the process in my own hands until I felt ready. It did not feel like hoarding power at the time. It felt like being responsible.

What changed it was admitting it. At the next workshop, I put my own uncertainty on the table, told the room I was stuck, and handed the problem back to them to work on with me. The moment I let go, the work opened up. What followed was the richest set of insights I had gathered on that project, and the first rough prototypes that finally gave everyone something real to push against. Sharing the power did not weaken my position. It was the only thing that moved the work forward - through a co-design approach.

Map the Real Power, Build Alliances

Working with power starts with knowing where it actually sits: who can sponsor change, stall it, dilute it, or shut it down with one sentence. Bring those people in early, even when it is uncomfortable. It is far easier than reviving work after resistance surfaces. And do not rely on a single senior sponsor; if they move on, the work collapses. Build support across three levels: the frontline, mid-level managers (who hold the operational understanding), and senior leaders who can unlock structural change. Power shared across roles carries more weight than power concentrated in one advocate.

Make Power Visible, and Remember Your Own

People get defensive when power is framed as an accusation, so aim for clarity, not confrontation. Map where decisions actually get made, rather than where the chart says they should. Ask groups where they feel powerless, and leaders where they feel squeezed. Something surprising tends to happen: leaders soften when they see their own pressure mapped honestly, and shift from defending their role to solving the problem.

And do not underestimate your own influence. The person who frames the insight, chooses the method, or writes the summary is shaping the reality everyone else works from. If you hold the pen, you hold power. Use it with care, and do not be afraid to hand the pen to someone else.

Probing Reflective Questions For You to Unpack this Principle

- 1 Where in your current work is participation genuine, and where might it be performative?
- 2 Who holds the real power in the projects you are working on, and have you brought them into the conversation early enough?
- 3 How do you create safety for the people with the least power in your process?
- 4 When did you last examine your own invisible power, as the person who frames the insights and chooses the methods?
- 5 What would change if you treated every participation activity as a negotiation with the system, rather than a one-off event?

PRINCIPLE #07 SUSTAINABILITY & RESPONSIBILITY

Use What You Already Have

- Human Centered Design cannot ignore the planet it operates on. We were taught that progress means more: more features, more speed, more growth. Look beneath the surface of digital work and that story unravels. Every decision draws from somewhere: energy, minerals, land, labour. Digital is not weightless. It is just conveniently out of sight, and once you see that, you cannot unsee it.

Progress Without Restraint Is Not Progress

The industry loves efficiency because it suggests harm falls as performance rises. It often does not. Make an efficient thing and use it at massive scale, and the impact grows rather than shrinks. This is the rebound effect, sometimes called the Jevons paradox, and it is the part we tend to forget.

Restraint is not something designers are trained to value, but it is a powerful move. It forces clarity and honesty about whether the work adds value or just volume. That can feel paralysing if you do not believe you hold the power to challenge assumptions about growth. Even small moves matter. Pointing back to your organisation's sustainability mandate and pausing is itself a meaningful act of responsibility.

Responsibility Is Not Evenly Distributed

Digital products look clean on the surface. The mess sits behind them: mining, data centres, energy grids, and the communities that bear the cost without the benefit. Costs are often public while profits stay private. Even renewable energy becomes a contested resource as demand grows. Seeing the full picture feels heavy, but it also gives you agency. When you understand the system, you

can challenge the assumptions that quietly drive impact: ask where the load lands, push back on features that add weight without value, and bring lifecycle thinking in before decisions are locked in.

One of my favourite exercises with a team is to take an existing stakeholder map and push it a few layers past where they feel their control ends. I often use a bakery. Asked to design a service for a business like that, we would map the inner workings of the organisation, which is usually what the brief asks for. But look one layer further out and the dependencies appear: the farmers, the fertiliser production, the seed suppliers. Extending the map does two things. It shows where the service could quietly fail upstream, in a dependency nobody was watching. And it forces the harder questions a sustainability lens demands: what is the impact of the farming practices here, and are the materials sourced ethically?

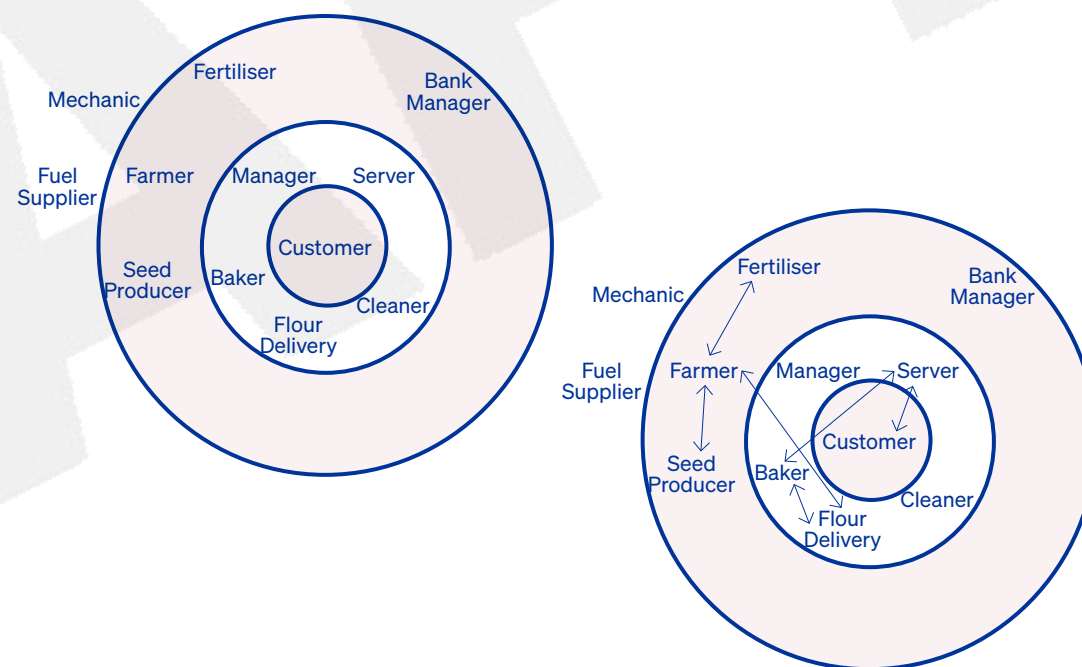


Fig. 2. A bakery's stakeholder map extended one layer out, from the inner organisation to the upstream dependencies it relies on (right). Credit: Humana Design.

Ethics And Longevity

A product is not sustainable if it harms people, even if it saves energy. Ethics is not the garnish at the end. It is the baseline. On the ground that looks like raising concerns early, making trade-offs visible, and being willing to decline work that crosses a line.

We are conditioned to celebrate the shiny new thing, but sustainability lives in the teams who maintain, repair, and simplify. As Gerry McGovern argues, **we need a maintenance culture far more than we need useless innovation.** Waste in digital usually shows up as complexity: scripts we do not need, features nobody uses, layers that only slow things down. Sometimes the most responsible step is not a redesign. It is a clean-up. Designing for longevity means removing what no longer serves, building for clarity over novelty, and valuing the people who keep things running as much as the people who build new things.

Probing Reflective Questions For You to Unpack this Principle

- 1 Where in your current work might you be adding complexity or features without clear evidence that they add value for people?
- 2 How does your organisation account for the environmental and social costs of the services it delivers?
- 3 Rather than offsetting, where and how could you reduce, remove, reuse, or recycle instead?
- 4 When did your team last choose to remove something rather than add something, and what made that possible?
- 5 What would it look like to treat maintenance and simplification as design innovation in your context?
- 6 How do you personally reconcile the pressure to deliver more with the responsibility to use less?

PRINCIPLE #08 TRUST & TRANSPARENCY

Treat Trust as Infrastructure

- Trust is not a soft outcome. It is the service. We talk about it as something earned once, at launch, a box to pass. It is not a milestone. It is a relationship people renegotiate every single time they use what we build.

This principle is about that relationship: whether people trust the service, and feel trusted by it. The next one, Clarity and Simplicity, is about something different, whether they can actually understand the service and complete it. The two are cousins, not the same thing.

The Two Faces of Trust

Most organisations are good at internal trust: with sponsors, leadership, delivery teams. Roadmaps, governance, and reporting all exist to reassure the system that the work is controlled. Far less visible, and far more fragile, is trust with the people who actually rely on the service. This is true even in government services, where there is often no money changing hands. Something is still exchanged: time, dignity, emotional energy, a sense of being believed. Trust is spent and earned in how clearly a service explains itself, whether people feel guided or tested, whether the system assumes good intent or treats everyone as a risk to manage. These are trust-building moments, and they are rarely measured or protected.

Confusion is a Service Failure

When a service is confusing, people look for someone to blame, and too often that blame lands on the individual. Designing for comprehension is not optional. It is a duty, and the burden sits with the provider, not the person navigating it under stress. I have watched this play out in public services again and again. Someone applies for a benefit they are entitled to. The form is confusing. They make an error. The system treats the error as their failure and asks them to

resubmit. The delay causes real hardship, and at no point does anyone ask whether the form was the problem. Confusion is not a user failure. It is a service failure, and it is one of the most common ways trust is quietly destroyed.

The Quiet Erosion, and the Cost

When services repeatedly fail people, trust erodes long before complaints surface. It rarely arrives as outrage. It shows up in whispers: a loss of confidence, a sense of resignation, a decision not to engage, not to apply, not to vote. As Laura Yarrow, Head of Design at GDS, put it, progress happens at the speed of trust, and it is a really slow thing to develop and a really quick thing to break. That distrust is hard to detect because it is not shouted, but once embedded it is incredibly hard to undo.

It carries real cost, even if it never appears on a balance sheet: higher call volumes, repeat contacts, abandonment, escalation, and emotional labour shifted onto the user. We measure efficiency, throughput, and compliance. We almost never measure the cost of distrust.

What Trust-Building Looks Like

Trust-building services start from a different place. They assume people are doing their best. They explain decisions rather than hide behind policy. They are honest about constraints rather than pretending to be perfect. They create clarity where there is complexity. Trust is built through consistency, honesty, and humility, especially when things go wrong. Every confusing form and unexplained decision is a small withdrawal from a shared trust account, and the withdrawals add up. If we want services people believe in, we have to stop treating trust as a communications problem and start treating it as infrastructure: designed, maintained, and protected over time. When trust collapses, people do not just lose confidence in the service. They lose confidence in the system behind it.

Probing Reflective Questions For You to Unpack this Principle

- 1 How does your service build trust with the people who rely on it, and how do you know whether that trust is growing or eroding?
- 2 Where in your service might confusion be silently damaging the relationship between the organisation and the people it serves?
- 3 What would change if you measured the cost of distrust as seriously as you measure efficiency and throughput?

- 4 Does your service assume good intent from the people using it, or does it treat them as risks to be managed?
- 5 When something goes wrong in your service, how transparent is the organisation about what happened and why?

PRINCIPLE #09 CLARITY & SIMPLICITY

Make the Complex Understandable

- Clarity is not a visual treatment or a tidy interface. It is a decision about who you are designing for and who you are willing to inconvenience. When a service is unclear, the burden almost always falls on the person using it, not the organisation that built it. Services accumulate complexity over time. Policies stack, exceptions multiply, and the org chart leaks into the experience until people have to endure the service rather than understand it.

Where the previous principle was about trust, the relationship between a person and a service, this one is about comprehension: whether a person can understand what is being asked and act on it without undue effort.

The Invisible Cost of Complexity

When clarity breaks down, people rarely complain at first. They hesitate, they make mistakes, and then they blame themselves. This is why research matters: not to validate what we built, but to reveal the gap between how a service was designed to work and how people actually experience it. That gap is where clarity lives or dies. The principle asks us to look at the full end-to-end experience, not just the parts that are easy to measure or safe to change, and to be honest about where it breaks down across channels and teams.

The Danger of False Progress

Speed gets celebrated as innovation, especially with AI and automation in the mix. But speed does not create trust. Without alignment and shared understanding, it just accelerates the path to failure: misaligned decisions reach scale faster, and fragility shows sooner. The work of clarity is slower because it is human work. It means bringing people together across silos, making assumptions visible, and fixing system-level issues rather than decorating symptoms. Weak leaders see slowness where there is actually care.

Simplicity is Refinement, Not Subtraction

Clarity is not stripping things back until they are empty. It is making thoughtful choices and treating reduction as a legitimate form of innovation. It is far easier to add than to subtract. Adding feels productive; subtracting feels risky. But every unnecessary field, step, or page adds cognitive load, and cognitive load is not free. It costs attention, energy, and confidence. The best simplification I have seen was not about removing things. It was about revealing what matters most and organising everything else around it. That is editorial work as much as design work.

No single team owns clarity. It emerges when designers, policy makers, technologists, and leaders share responsibility for how something is experienced end to end. As Russell Davies says, show the thing. Get the work on the walls and let people see what you see. When everyone sees the same picture, alignment becomes possible. When the work stays hidden in documents, misalignment grows silently.

Probing Reflective Questions For You to Unpack this Principle

- 1 Do you know if your service is genuinely clear to use, or is that an assumption based on familiarity?
- 2 Where do people hesitate, pause, or abandon the journey altogether, and what is causing that friction?
- 3 When was the last time a complete, end-to-end evaluation of your service was conducted, and who was in the room?
- 4 What complexity exists in your service because it serves the organisation rather than the person using it?
- 5 Where are you optimising for speed before alignment has been earned?

PRINCIPLE #10

CRITIQUE & REFLECTION

Keep Questioning

- Design is never finished. The final principle is a continuous practice of questioning assumptions, owning both our conscious choices and our unconscious bias, and choosing curiosity over certainty.

The Power of Listening, and Following the Unexpected

Looking back over the years since I qualified as a designer in 2002, sitting across from people and listening, what struck me most was never the answers people gave. It was what surfaced when they realised they were genuinely being heard. We tend to treat interviews as extraction: arrive with the questions prepared, the framework polished, the hypothesis ready to validate. The meaningful moments rarely arrive on schedule.

Jay Hasbrouck told me a story in 2017 that stuck. On a research trip to Japan with a large US retailer, the team had days of fieldwork and almost nothing to show for it. Then they noticed a man walking toward a glowing red neon sign, and followed him in. The space was dim and quiet. He sat and waited. A woman emerged with a box, and inside was a striking pair of sneakers. He tried them on, left his old shoes behind, and walked out in the new pair. It was a personal shoe service. In Japan, where apartments are small and storage is scarce, it stored, maintained, and curated people's shoe collections. A system built around lived reality, not assumptions. None of it would have come from a discussion guide. It took patience, curiosity, and the willingness to follow something unexpected without knowing where it led.

What Lies Beneath, and Why it Matters

Again and again, people share things sitting just beneath the surface: frustrations they have normalised, workarounds they have stopped questioning, quiet

resignation no dashboard would ever reveal. These are not edge cases. They are signals. Interviews are not really about finding answers. They are about creating conditions where people feel confident enough to contribute, even when what they share is messy or unresolved. Rush them and you design for efficiency. Slow them down and you design for dignity.

Critique as a Practice

Critique is reflection's sharper sibling. Where reflection looks inward, critique looks at the work with honest, constructive eyes, not to tear it down but to make it better. The best critique I have had was generous in intent and specific in observation. It needs psychological safety, because critique without safety becomes judgement, and judgement shuts people down. Building a culture of critique means treating all work as provisional, and treating an unfinished thing shared as an act of trust. The most dangerous response to a design is not criticism. It is silence.

If you are planning interviews this week, the encouragement is simple: ask fewer questions, leave more space, and pay attention to what feels unexpected. That is usually where the real work begins.

Probing Reflective Questions For You to Unpack this Principle

- 1 Where am I rushing toward clarity instead of allowing uncertainty to do its work?
- 2 What signals am I overlooking because they do not fit my existing frameworks?
- 3 How often do I treat interviews as moments of extraction rather than moments of shared power?
- 4 Where might efficiency in my practice be quietly eroding dignity?
- 5 What would change if I designed my next research session around curiosity rather than validation?

TAKING YOUR OWN BEARINGS



- The ten principles are not a checklist to complete. They are bearings you keep coming back to to help guide you and your organisation towards becoming more human centered.

So before you leave Module 1, take an honest reading of where you actually are, not where you think you should be. The short survey below gives you a score out of ten for each principle. Enter those ten scores at the link overleaf and you will get back a radar chart of your own practice, free to download and print, so you can pin it up and watch the shape change as you grow.

How this Works

Each principle has two statements. The first is about you and how you practise. The second is about your organisation and how it responds. Circle a number from 1 to 5 for each, where 1 means rarely true and 5 means consistently true, then add the two together for a score out of ten for that principle. That gives you ten scores, one per axis. No one is watching, and the number is not the point. The honesty is.

When you have your ten scores, enter them at (QR CODE) to download your results, your radar chart to print for the wall, a smaller version sized for LinkedIn, and a free digital copy of the ten principles to keep.

PRINCIPLE 1. MINDSETS & PRINCIPLES

YOU: I come to the work as a learner, not as the person with the answer.

1 2 3 4 5

YOUR ORGANISATION: Where I work rewards curiosity and admitting what we do not know, rather than punishing it.

1 2 3 4 5

PRINCIPLE SCORE add the two, out of 10

PRINCIPLE 2. INCLUSION & EQUITY

YOU: I design with the people affected, and share real power with them.

1 2 3 4 5

YOUR ORGANISATION: My organisation expects and resources inclusive practice, rather than treating it as optional.

1 2 3 4 5

PRINCIPLE SCORE add the two, out of 10

PRINCIPLE 3. EMOTIONS & HUMANITY

YOU: I treat dignity, and how a service makes people feel, as real design outcomes.

1 2 3 4 5

YOUR ORGANISATION: My organisation cares how services make people feel, not only about speed and volume.

1 2 3 4 5

PRINCIPLE SCORE add the two, out of 10

PRINCIPLE 4. SYSTEMS & STRUCTURE

YOU: I follow the pain and map the relationships before I act.

1 2 3 4 5

YOUR ORGANISATION: My organisation lets me work across silos, rather than boxing me into my lane.

1 2 3 4 5

PRINCIPLE SCORE add the two, out of 10

PRINCIPLE 5. PROCESS & PRACTICE

YOU: I treat this as a living practice I keep honing, and I drop methods that stop serving the work.

1 2 3 4 5

YOUR ORGANISATION: My organisation gives me room to adapt the approach, rather than mandating a fixed process.

1 2 3 4 5

PRINCIPLE SCORE add the two, out of 10

PRINCIPLE 6. POWER & PARTICIPATION

YOU: I can tell real participation from theatre, and I make power visible, including my own.

YOUR ORGANISATION: My organisation genuinely shares power with the people it serves, rather than performing

PRINCIPLE SCORE add the two, out of 10

1 2 3 4 5

1 2 3 4 5

PRINCIPLE 7. SUSTAINABILITY & RESPONSIBILITY

YOU: I weigh the longer-term cost of what I make, not just the launch.

YOUR ORGANISATION: My organisation takes responsibility for long-term impact, rather than chasing short-term wins.

PRINCIPLE SCORE add the two, out of 10

1 2 3 4 5

1 2 3 4 5

PRINCIPLE 8. TRUST & TRANSPARENCY

YOU: I build trust deliberately, and I treat confusion as a failure I own.

YOUR ORGANISATION: My organisation is honest and transparent with people, rather than hiding behind

PRINCIPLE SCORE add the two, out of 10

1 2 3 4 5

1 2 3 4 5

PRINCIPLE 9. CLARITY & SIMPLICITY

YOU: I refine toward simplicity, rather than adding features or polish.

YOUR ORGANISATION: My organisation values simplicity, rather than rewarding more features and more process.

PRINCIPLE SCORE add the two, out of 10

1 2 3 4 5

1 2 3 4 5

PRINCIPLE 10. CRITIQUE & REFLECTION

YOU: I invite critique of my work, and I actually change my mind.

YOUR ORGANISATION: My organisation makes room for critique and reflection, rather than rushing to delivery.

PRINCIPLE SCORE add the two, out of 10

1 2 3 4 5

1 2 3 4 5

Reading Your Chart

Do not add up a grand total; it is not a grade. Look at the shape of the web. A roughly even shape means a balanced practice. Spikes and dents mean you lean on some principles and neglect others, which is true of almost everyone, and the dents are where the practice is asking for your attention. Look, too, at the gap inside each principle. If your own answer is high but the organisation answer is low, the block is the system around you, not you. If both are low, it is a place to grow. That gap is often the most useful thing on the page.

What to Do With it

Take your two lowest axes. For each one, name a single thing you could do more of, and a single thing you could do less of, and write it on the printed chart. Not ten things. One and one. Pin it somewhere you will see it, and score yourself again in six months. The principles are a compass, not a finish line. You return to them, you do not complete them.