

# Designing a Human-Centered Experience in a Complex System

*Enabling your ecosystem of people is the first step in achieving your organization's strategic goals.*

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irst, let’s define what we mean by a human-centered ecosystem.

In the business world, the human-centered ecosystem consists of your expansive set of interconnected stakeholders, from employees to customers and more (see below). There may be overlapping stakeholder sets. For example, your employees may be customers, and your local community may include investors. But by defining stakeholders, you can better consider impacts. Actions taken by one set of stakeholders will naturally impact others, either positively or negatively.

Business leadership should seek to establish interactions and inclusivity that enable positive outcomes. As John Muir, a pioneering naturalist, said in the book “The Yosemite,” “When you tug at a single thing in nature, you find it attached to the rest of the world.” In this article, we’ll focus on the employee experience and connectively to other stakeholder sets.



**WHO COMES FIRST, EMPLOYEES OR CUSTOMERS?**

*Hint: both*

What comes first: a positive employee experience or a positive customer experience? Can you have one without the other? In a symbiotic relationship, the sweet spot is in the middle, and you can design for this.

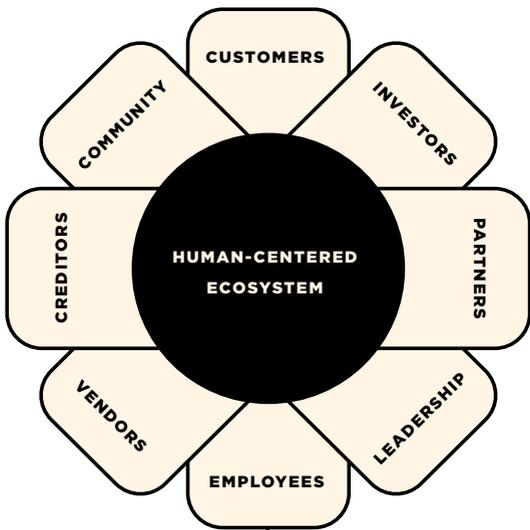
Your organization’s internal ways of working, including employee treatment, feed how you deliver your experience externally. Ideally, you follow your external customer-facing values internally.

For instance, let’s say your leadership notes that your organization is “customer-obsessed.” If customer-obsessed means your external-facing persona and market reputation is customer-friendly, what would it look like to be employee-obsessed? Well, your employees would objectively agree that you treat them fairly,

compensate them appropriately, empower them, and support them to foster a customer-obsessed culture. In the spirit of customer-obsessed innovation, they would agree ways of working are insights-led and experimentation-based.

Signals of being off course from this approach include unengaged employees, potentially leaving the company with heavy turnover. There are myriad potential reasons for employees to become unengaged. But we’d like to talk about participatory change and involved problem-solving. Feeling heard, valued, and part of a community are drivers of engagement. Some highly regulatory environments might generally require prescriptive path forward and dutiful order-taking. But organizational leadership that intentionally creates room for rewarding creative leadership and problem-solving amid execution best aligns to their workforce’s humanized value potential.

Consider this real-life example. Disney’s internal ethos strives in principle to make working there a magical experience for the employee. Disney equips employees with tools to solve customer problems creatively. Each employee seeks to create happiness, making each customer’s experience magical. Both experience perspectives are intertwined successfully.<sup>1,2</sup>



**SO, WHERE DO I START?**

*Start with Purpose and Strategic priorities. Clarify with Design Principles and Even/Over statements.*

Creating space for creativity first requires guidelines within which to experiment. So, step one is to establish your approach to strategy and

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guardrails. There are many articles on creating business strategies and creating aligned project plans, but we'd like to focus more on additional toolkit options that best support participatory human-centered design. But we'll speak to how they align to classic strategic planning exercises.

First off, make sure you have some form of a purpose statement. Everyone in your organization should be able to understand and rally behind it. Challenge your definition of simple and straightforward. Consider the simplicity of Mastercard's mission of “Kill cash.”<sup>3</sup>

Next, set a time-based strategic (for example, yearly) top priority and aligned action-oriented priorities that cascade. Then, consider what needs to be true to support your strategy becoming a reality. Create priority clarity across teams while also letting leaders and team members offer their ideas on how to back those up, including developing their OKRs and supporting initiatives. Of course, your priority and selected supporting initiative set should align to your organization's mission/vision/purpose statement. And the activity of performing selection inherently includes prioritization rationalization, i.e., focus and tradeoffs.

Here's where this gets interesting. To evaluate alignment, you need clear guardrails. Consider creating **Design Principles and Even/Over statements** that complement your purpose statement. Together, they support measured prioritization evaluation. The idea is to create easy-to-understand organic operating norms that everyone on your team can use to make decisions amid execution. This understanding helps your team carry out priorities in alignment to vision, bolstering outcomes. Across your entire human-centered ecosystem, they reinforce, and in turn, strengthen your brand.

What are **Design Principles**? Design Principles bring clarity to ambiguous goals and purpose statements. You create them by selecting a few keywords that embody an ideal state experience

and crafting accompanied definition phrases—the definitions help people understand what would constitute success. Ideally, your principles bridge the experiences across your human-centered ecosystem. These Design Principles can evolve into clear beliefs, which Seth Godin refers to as “People like us do things like this.”<sup>4</sup> If believed in and co-created with those impacted by the work, Design Principles bring deep value add to your business in terms of portfolio prioritization, decision-making, and the shared ownership required to win in today's complex markets.

A unique way to add further clarity to Design Principles is **Even/Over** statements. They are “a compact way of expressing a strategic preference between two good alternatives.”<sup>5</sup> They are phrased like this: “X even over Y.” This leveling makes it incredibly clear what to deprioritize when needed. Your organization can use Even/Over statements when formally evaluating company-wide initiative alignment, say for yearly planning. But the level of clarity they bring lends itself to influencing ongoing autonomous behavior. Your team is empowered to focus on the most important goal. It becomes a simple decision framework that every team member can fall back on. Here are a few examples:

“**Market share** even over **profitability**.” (Amazon)

“**Deliver luxury** even over **value for money**.” (Hypothetical luxury hotel)

Still not sold? Consider how you might deploy efforts if you swap the order of your statements. Here are two great ones:<sup>6</sup>

“For this quarter, we prioritize **employee development** even over **margin targets**.” or

“For this quarter, we prioritize **margin targets** even over **employee development**.”

Both concepts might be priorities that matter. But proactively leveling

concepts provides clear direction on how everyone in your ecosystem should act when confronted with prioritizing investments like time, money, and creative strategy. In the former, a team lead may decide it makes sense to invest now in training for their whole team or a particular team member with a goal of subsequent return on investment. In the latter, if a team lead receives a more expensive training request, they might make the call to defer it to the next quarter if they aren't hitting their margin targets in this one.



#### I HAVE A STRATEGY AND DESIGN PRINCIPLES. NOW WHAT?

*Leverage participatory leadership, change, and execution within milestone-guidepost-framed operating rhythms.*

How do you bring those Design Principles to life through ways of working? You've likely heard tips before around predicting and planning, rolling out change, and utilizing change. Let's talk instead about human-experience-driven methods of participatory change. Consider establishing **operating rhythms** and tracking progress against flexible **milestone guideposts**.

The combination of operating rhythms and flexible milestone guideposts provides systems that are adaptable over time. They reinforce a culture of problems to be solved, foster co-creation, and create feedback loops that inform progress. Operating rhythms provide scaffolding for participatory change. They embed the human experience into the design of new work, enabling your ecosystem of people to gain and feel agency. Your ecosystem gains an orientation toward learning by doing. Amid your rhythms, it is essential to form around target

milestones. These metric-based goals only then group to form big rocks.

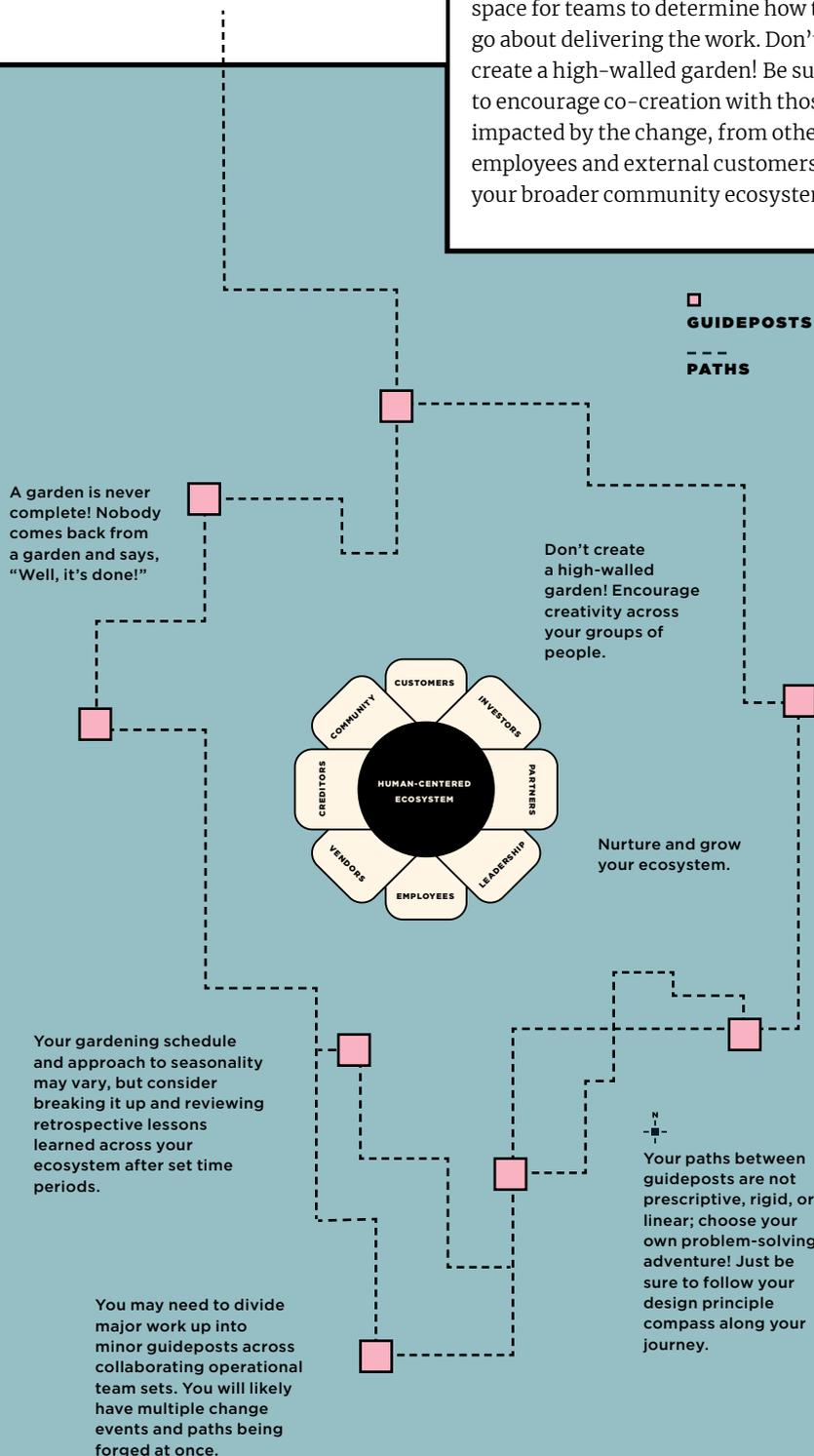
As we explain a few concepts in more detail, we are going to fall back on a “full garden” metaphor, as visualized below.

**Where to begin:** To establish this framework at your organization, first take the opportunity to provide directional alignment via the efforts described in the earlier sections in this article. Then, most crucially, allow space for teams to determine how they go about delivering the work. Don’t create a high-walled garden! Be sure to encourage co-creation with those impacted by the change, from other employees and external customers to your broader community ecosystem

where appropriate. This approach to work provides **agency** to those closest to the problem and **autonomy** for teams to own their work, as they become problem-solvers, not cogs. Agency and autonomy are two critical criteria for human motivation, as shown in Daniel Pink’s research.<sup>7</sup>

**Use reachable guideposts on the path to significant goals:** Milestones are guideposts to validate that you are on the right track. Heading toward the expected goal and not meeting them exactly as planned is not a failure. Think that way, and you will fall back on old habits of forced top-down-mandated delivery without room for flexibility in the how and when. As opposed to “big bang” change, split work into bite-sized pieces within your ecosystem focused on aspects of your organization’s operating system. Let those closest to the problem impact and even own the solution, teams prioritize their work, and your organization continuously learn from insights, experience, and evidence. You will likely have multiple change events and paths being forged at once. Help teams understand the problem to be solved, proactively determine feedback loops between leadership, groups, and customers, then start the work. Learn by doing. And when unsure, empower your team to use your Design Principles as their compass. As Gary Hamel, author of “Humanocracy”, states, “I believe that in the future, every change program will need to be socially constructed. Change programs need to roll up, not down. Change programs that cascade down are too slow. They’re too incremental. They’re not sufficiently nuanced — they don’t take account of local subtleties. They feel imposed, and therefore illegitimate. This is why 70 percent of change programs fail.”<sup>8</sup>

**Example: A 12-week year:** Some nimble organizations leverage the practice of a 12-week year. Ask what you need to focus on for the next 12 weeks (including metrics, purpose, and vision) that may move the needle



in the desired direction. Have your teams ask themselves, “What should I do today to have more stories like X and fewer stories like Y?” Ultimately, shrink a bigger goal into a 12-week direction that includes weekly learning loops and retrospectives. Remember, your ecosystem is ever evolving. No one ever came back in from a garden and said, “Hey, I fixed it; I’ve completed all the work ever required on the garden!” But a gardener might have said, “I’ve learned from experimenting with watering — this plant needs refreshment every week, this other one every day in the summer.” Whatever garden seasonality you choose — no matter how you choose to slice it — the goal is to work toward incremental progress vs. feeling like change goals are simply shifting flavors of the month.

**Governance:** You will need to create the appropriate level of governance for your company, including risk mitigation. Consider what to implement now vs. later vs. continuously to mitigate risk (market risk, internal flight risk, CX risk, etc.) and then ensure that the appropriate parties required have decision rights to iterate along the way. Take the garden example: Who decides what pesticides are allowed in the garden? Who approves gardeners’ time off? Who approves cutting down a tree? Do you need a governing body to approve the introduction of new species, or can you trust gardener buyers to follow the rules to stay within a tropical family?

**Change perspective of status reporting:** A significant benefit to this approach is the openness it creates in acknowledging the potential weight of a current task at hand, hurdles with interpersonal dynamics and processes, and transparent and honest insight into the current status and projected outcomes. You decrease the risk of performative management and status reporting theater. Your goal is to avoid degrading useful governance meetings into “must be green” status meetings where stoplight colors hide nuanced truth. Seek to progress meeting and team dynamics toward transparency, strategy setting, and

decision-making rhythms, *even over* reporting out positive progress. From a human experience perspective, this means transparently sharing experience metric findings and new design concepts at regular cadences and so everyone can action off them in between. For example, understanding that your garden is binarily alive or dead isn’t helpful. Meeting to discuss a plant looking a bit rough and teaming together to determine a new way to prune it is.

**Consent vs. consensus:** Foster a willingness to quickly iterate — balance business agility with a level of risk. Consider what you are testing, at what level, and for what duration. Embrace small-scale pilots and beta releases. Reinforce a culture of shorter feedback loops based on action, not opinion. Your human-centered ecosystem should understand that your organization continuously iterates and improves. If so, they will understand that a request to change is simply asking them to agree to try (consent) versus asking them to agree wholeheartedly with the concept (consensus). Back at the garden, let’s say your gardeners all agree to let visitors in the garden on weekends, but after trying it out, they realize you need to add trash cans so visitors are less likely to litter.

**Reward “try” behavior:** To make this all work, your employees must be backed by rewarding “try” behavior vs. blaming or penalizing “try and fail” performance. Employee measurements, incentives, and goals should support and bolster your mission, purpose statement, Design Principles, and Even/Over statements. Delivering customers’ experience includes letting people who either interact directly with or create products/services for the customer to get creative. Nurture employees who develop and action above and beyond ideas. For instance, perhaps one of your gardeners is frustrated with being asked the names of plants all the time, so she puts up signs of their names. Don’t penalize her for being lazy. Reward her for

making more time for gardeners to focus on gardening.

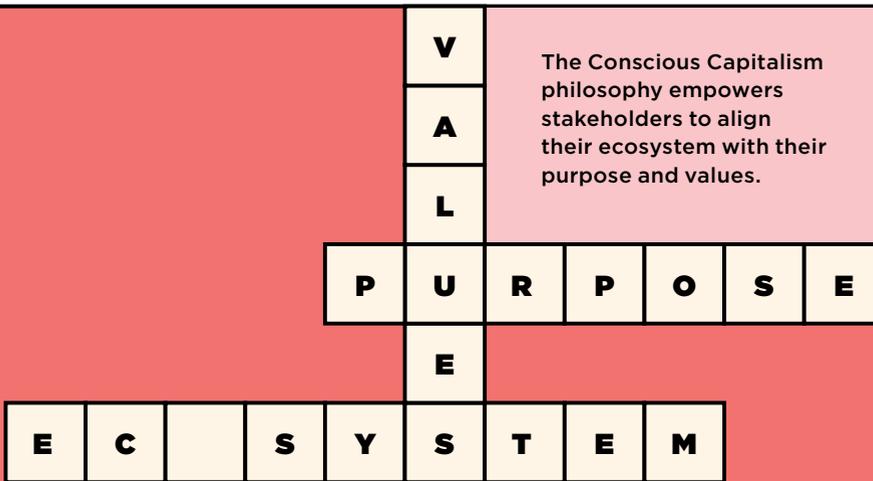
**Address tension:** As your teams shift toward a more participatory way of working, be on the lookout for causes of friction. Perhaps an ego has lost the ability to perform in theatre-driven meetings. Maybe a conservative risk-taking culture reverts to the status quo; a leader puts a stake in the ground and says “Deliver exactly XYZ by this precise date in this particular way,” but a team thinks it will lead to a poor outcome. Perhaps some nontitled individuals are taking the opportunity to deliver value, at odds with prior leadership direction. Maybe one team is frustrated by how another group is producing work. And, for a final garden metaphor, perhaps one gardener’s weed is another gardener’s treasured botanical. Expect these tensions. Be intentional about openly discussing them as a team: This frankness is critical toward evolving into this new way of working.



#### WHAT'S THE LONG-TERM VALUE OF THIS APPROACH?

*Consistency in core values drives financial value; intersection with purpose-driven companies.*

If this sounds too soft or too risky, consider this alternative scenario at risk of occurring in classic working systems. Imagine that a frontline team member speaks with a customer about a core product issue the customer is facing. The team member identifies a possible way to solve the problem and advises the manager. This team member waits three weeks for managers to run the issue up the chain. Then they wait another three weeks for the approved solution to come back down the chain. Six weeks later, the team member attempts to respond to the customer. The customer has already tried to create a workaround and



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eventually found another solution with another brand. In our social media megaphone era, it's only a matter of time before this poorly delivered experience is shared broadly. Your company is at risk of being engulfed by the market, and your customer's wallet share headed to your competitor. Your employee and managers are frustrated by their feeling of impotence. Perhaps many leave to work for the other brand. It becomes harder to retain and hire the best team. Revenue loss impacts trickle across investors, the partners you work with, and so forth across your ecosystem.

This topic intersects with the concept of balanced, purpose-driven companies. There's much more to unpack here that we won't get to today, but at its core, corporate social responsibility choices, big and small, are now baked into brand value. Some call it ikigai (loosely translated from Japanese as "reason for being") for business. An ecosystem view embraced by the Conscious Capitalism<sup>9</sup> philosophy is that companies have a vested interest in caring about everyone in their ecosystem. Conscious Capitalists form an environment in which their stakeholders create value and positive winning outcomes for all. They empower their ecosystem to align with their

purpose and values. Everyone authentically works toward creating consistency in their product, brand, and delivered experience. They start by understanding and empowering their operations' interconnected nature and the underlying human-centered ecosystem. As Tricia Griffith, CEO of Progressive, says, "CEOs work to generate profits and return value to shareholders, but the best-run companies do more. They put the customer first and invest in their employees and communities. In the end, it's the most promising way to build long-term value."<sup>10</sup>

To achieve your organization's strategic goals, including retaining or gaining customer share of wallet, investment, and recruits, you must enable your ecosystem of people. Define your purpose statement. Craft design principles that keep your ecosystem aligned to your experience vision. Establish broad company priorities and align efforts across the organization. Establish and empower organic operating rhythms. Start tracking toward flexible team-based milestones. Foster agency and autonomy amid cocreation and continuous improvement. Back it all by rewarding try behavior. You'll see your big rocks come to fruition soon enough. ■