Organizational design can bring institutional resiliency

By Debbie Creamer

As theological schools and other organizations (including ATS) live into the reality that there is "no more normal" (if there ever was!), strategies from the work of organizational design can help foster innovation, institutional resiliency, and improved responsiveness to ecosystems and changing contexts.

Organizational design

In its simplest form, design is the purposeful process of asking (what are we trying to do? why are we trying to do it?), making (putting things into practice), asking again (what did we learn? did we succeed? could we do it differently/better?), and then making again. It always emerges from and engages with concrete and local practices (if you're interested in learning more on how this has come about at ATS and how this cycle of grounded practical reflection might work in your context, you can read my thoughts here).

Good design focuses on iteration over completion, which makes it a never-ending process. It keeps our attention on goals, purposes, and outcomes even as we also recognize that we can never control a conclusion or result. Seeking surprises and the unexpected, we lean into practices of experimentation, iteration, and evaluation, and we attend to users, contexts, ecosystems, and data.

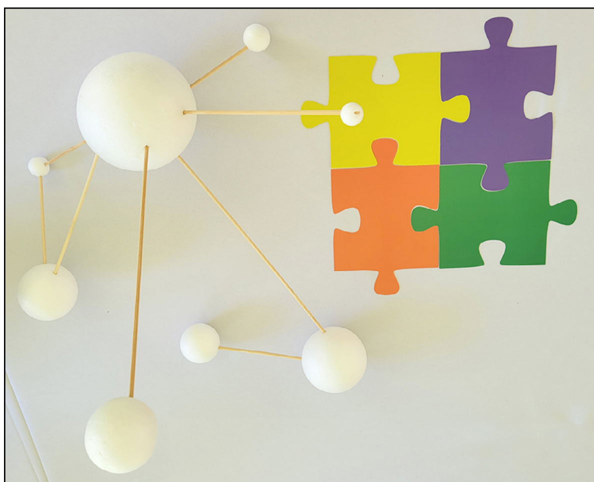
When we look specifically at ***organizational design***, we bring the work of design into a particular kind of structured (and, often, fraught) environment. Organizations, like families, always have a history and are not starting from scratch. This is true of all kinds of design—we never start from nothing—but is an inescapable fact when we are working with organizations, where it's hard to imagine a clean slate or a fresh start even as a thought experiment. Organizations are formed and constrained by their stakeholders, past as well as present. For example, as we consider our upcoming ATS staff Christmas party with a newly hybrid workforce, we are not only looking ahead to this celebration and the staff who would be participating. We are also surrounded by memories and stories of parties from the past, and expectations and unspoken rules about how these things should go. Design helps us disrupt this by talking not just about practices (especially those we might want to adjust or improve) but also about goals—what do we seek to accomplish or experience through this party? Yet, unless we also acknowledge the history that shows up, like it or not, we are unlikely to effect change or create a satisfying outcome.

Beyond this, we also recognize that organizational memory favors inertia, conservation, and even regressive

behaviors. Organizations and other institutions are built—intentionally or not—to provide stability, to outlast individuals, to create and maintain equilibrium, and to persevere. Like certain kinds of malleable physical materials (perhaps, clay or pastry?), once the organization has taken a particular form, it has a muscle memory that unconsciously constricts back to that older form whenever we stop attending to it, and I find this to be true whether we are talking about antiracist practices in predominantly or historically white institutions or about metaphorical cats tied to trees. Thus, the work of organizational design has the added emphasis of disrupting the inertia and muscle memory of the organization—actively, intentionally, playfully, resiliently—through experimentation, iteration, and evaluation.

Thus, the work of organizational design has the added emphasis of disrupting the inertia and muscle memory of the organization—actively, intentionally, playfully, resiliently—through experimentation, iteration, and evaluation.

When we were reorganizing my position at ATS to focus on this area of work, we purposely chose the job title of *design and organizational learning* rather than just organizational design. This signals some important things—while our process is design, our purpose is learning and that is a never-ending process. While some approaches to design make this clear (particularly through the language of iteration and experimentation), it is too easy to think that we'll eventually "get things right" and be able to move on. In some applications of design work, where contracts are completed and folks move on to the next opportunity, we forget the need for "design work" around things that are less visible or less shiny (even focusing on routine maintenance, as design theorist Roman Mars notes).


Organizational design props used during a recent ATS staff retreat.

I have also found it helpful to borrow language from economist Russ Roberts and others, that this work is more mystery than puzzle. There are things that can be fixed and most of us find this process of solving puzzles—the daily *Wordle* or a longstanding dilemma—to be incredibly satisfying, but the overall work we do doesn't have "a solution." It is more an ongoing mystery that invites continuous exploration and learning, where change and surprise become more ordinary than stability and order. Not only does this focus on learning allow for innovation and responsiveness to context, which we see as key for organizational thriving in our settings, but it also enables us to attend to (and even embrace) human vulnerability, interdependence, entanglement, and limits not as faults in the system but as unsurprising and valuable factors in our ability to create and engage.

Starting points

As I noted earlier, design is a robust area of study in its own right, grounded in theory and filled with well-tested practices. It takes time, skill, mutual responsibility, and humility for design to be done well, as design can easily be done badly, and its commitments can be easily misunderstood or mishandled. For example, the key idea of "user-centered design" can quickly become self-centered or self-perpetuating (when people say "I know what our users need" in ways that perpetuate bias or insularity), and designers can easily grow too full of themselves or overestimate their abilities to control environments (as the design justice movement reminds us). Regardless, as

we lean into design for the sake of organizational learning, below are some starting points that you might find helpful.

Choose team over isolation

Team can be seen as the building block of organizational design in two ways. First, a design team is essential, rather than an isolated designer, especially as we recognize that each of us humans is incomplete, fallible, and limited. Inclusive leadership strategist Ruchika Tulshyan notes, "Culture that accepts and learns from failure involves people committing to being honest, and being aware that they only see part of the reality of the entire situation." I rely on my team, recognizing both that we are interdependent and entangled, and that we *need to be* interdependent and entangled to help our organization thrive and adapt to changing contexts (even though my name is on this article, it—like all of my work—is deeply informed by the work of my teams).

Secondly, I believe that constellations of teams are the best way to imagine and to enact a thriving organization. Author Peter Block observes that "we change the world one room at a time" and that the "small group is the unit of transformation." He observes that small groups foster authenticity and care as well as a self-correcting quality when things are not going well. They enable us to get unstuck, they allow us to shift power structures, they help us take responsibility. Organizations that thrive, specifically in changing contexts, lean into their teams and learn from their teams.

Choose mistakes over perfection

People make mistakes, and people in organizations make *lots* of mistakes. Pretending we don't or hiding the ones we do make takes a lot of energy that could be put toward more productive and goal-centered endeavors. It keeps us from taking risks or stepping outside of our comfort zones that cuts us off from innovative possibilities or improved responsiveness to changing contexts. We'd rather do what we are already comfortable with than try something new, particularly something new that we might screw up and could make us look bad. But we remind our teammates that we are trying new experiments and that most experiments fail—if we don't experience failure and make mistakes, we are most likely wasting our efforts and our people.

Choose process over completion

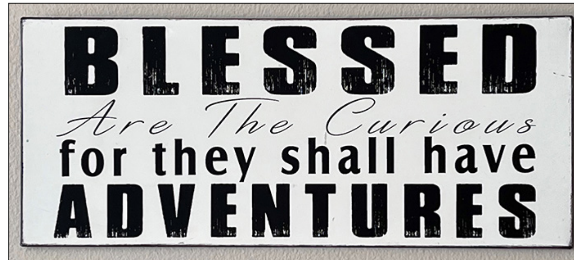
Even beyond failure and mistakes, it is also helpful to lean into imperfection and incompleteness, remembering that clear goals with imperfect practices are better than fuzzy goals with polished practices. Continuing to articulate and ask about our goals gives us a better chance of actually achieving them rather than just trying to improve our practices in ways that may not serve our mission or our users. The simple fact of naming our practices as imperfect gives us space and permission to work on improving them. As John Maeda notes in his discussion of agile and timely design, "the beauty of delivering unfinished and incomplete products is that you can always improve them later" and that "quality is about proudly embracing the attitude of working incrementally and completely underwhelmingly—to send oneself on a never-ending journey of making." Leaning into the beauty of the incomplete is one way to increase organizational adaptability and creativity.

Leaning into the beauty of the incomplete is one way to increase organizational adaptability and creativity.

Choose kindness over politeness

If an organization is going to favor mistakes and incompleteness, it also must value kindness—this is not only humane but also practical. As Maeda notes, "an incomplete idea is only a good one if you iterate," and so we must create cultures that empower people with the resiliency to keep going (try again, fail again, fail better). I see kindness as different than politeness, which sometimes acts as a cover for all sorts of unhelpful behaviors like passivity or passive-aggressiveness. Kindness is better captured in what Tulshyan describes as "psychological

safety," which she says comes from normalizing failure and having a process to discuss it. She tells the story of a team that engages in an annual "fail fest" at the end of each year to discuss and celebrate mistakes. She notes that this contributes not only to a greater sense of belonging across the entire team, but that it also serves as an antiracist practice by reducing the pressure on those who are in the minority to "be perfect" in order to prove their right to belong. For this sort of kindness to thrive requires that we accept discomfort and conflict, but it is a surer path to innovation and growth than being conflict-adverse and polite.



Choose curiosity, always

I have a sign on the wall in my office: "Blessed are the curious, for they shall have adventures." So much of good organizational design seems to be about asking good questions. Why are we doing this? Why are *we* doing this? Could/should we do it differently? Who are we serving? Who are we missing? Who would miss us if we stopped? Peter Block observes that "questions are more transforming than answers." I think that's especially true as we do the work of organizational design amid changing contexts, and as we seek to address not only the "new" needs around us but also those we perhaps never met well in the past. In addition, I love leaning into curiosity because it can constructively coexist with chaos, conflict, and change. Most organizations—again, by their very natures—seek to tame chaos, hide conflict, and resist change. Genuine curiosity can be a subversive response and an incredibly helpful tool as we seek to foster an ethos of continual learning in our teams, organizations, and beyond.

As we continue to live into this new focus on organizational design at ATS, we will be sharing more reflections and creating learning resources for members and other stakeholders who are interested in exploring this with us. In the meantime, email me if you are interested in learning more.

Debbie Creamer *is Senior Director of Design and Organizational Learning at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*