

ELISA HAYS

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EMPATHY by DESIGN

“I think like a designer,” I commented to a friend recently. “No,” she answered, “you ARE a designer. “

Come to think of it.....

For the last two weeks I’ve obsessed over tiny details of the plans for our new house. A tape measure, 1/4” scale ruler, sharp pencil and an eraser have been my best friends. I didn’t create the house plan, but I’m making it work for our family and my accessibility needs because I use a cane, walker or wheelchair at any given time. We love our current custom house, but the lack of universal design creates a lot of challenges.

I actually did design our current house eighteen years ago. I’ve only myself to blame for the long and steeply sloped sidewalk, narrow kitchen and dozens of other accessibility oversights. Ironically, we had envisioned caring for an elderly parent here. A multi-purpose guest room connects to a bathroom on the ground floor near the front door where a ramp slopes onto the porch. Wasn’t that smart and kind and gee what a good daughter I am.

Except I had no EMPATHY. I didn’t ask a single person with mobility challenges what they need in their environment to feel safe, comfortable and welcome. As it turns out I am the only person who has needed all of those things and NONE of it works well! Thankfully my aging but very active parents have done a great job helping to care for my needs. And I got a humbling, expensive lesson in the importance of deep empathy as a first step.

“Empathy is at the heart of design. Without the understanding of what others see, feel, and experience, design is a pointless task. ” [Tim Brown, IDEO](#)

In the years that followed, my career led to designing Sudsy’s Barn hand washing attraction, Washington County Fair’s Growing Grove “growing healthy kids from the ground up” family area, Solano County Fair’s Ag-tion Ranch family entertainment area, four different interactive edutainment programs, the

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mentoring sensation called Ment-a-Minute used by the International Association of Fairs and Expositions, and a Speed Dating style networking program used by several state associations.

What do all of these have in common? They meet the needs of people by designing experiences through a creative process known as human-centered design thinking. And it begins with empathy.

Before [Sudsy's Barn](#) became a reality, I spent hours watching moms fumbling at sinks trying to wash the hands of squirming children. As a mom of three, empathy came pretty easy. But it wasn't enough. Before trying to invent solutions, three steps need to be taken:

1. Empathy - observe with heart, not head, to connect to the human condition
2. Compassion - focus on how it feels for the person you're trying to serve
3. Imagination - daydream like it's your job

You may not be designing a house or inventing a new hand washing system, but the principle holds true when designing guest experiences for any type of business – i.e. fairs, hotels, retail, or healthcare. Or preparing for a difficult conversation as a leader. Human centered design thinking leads to creativity in not only physical spaces, but also in how people connect with each other.

Design thinking is a process, not a product. Brainstorming ideas before deeply developed empathy puts the proverbial cart before the horse and will result in costly ineffective experiments. Instead, slow down and think with heart. Begin with empathy, compassion and imagination to design innovative and adaptive experiences.

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Elisa Hays is an expert in leadership, disability awareness, and experiential design. She speaks to and works with organizations who want a devoted community of employees and patrons developed through whole-hearted leadership.

*Programs related to this article include:
“IMPACT: A Crash Course in Leadership”
“Beyond ADA: Designing Guest Experiences for Extraordinary IMPACT”*