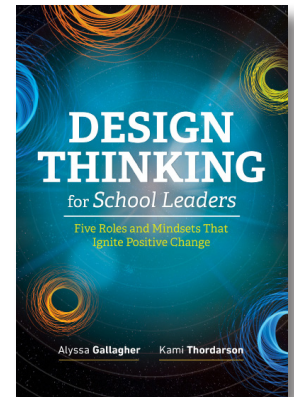


# Design Thinking for School Leaders

Five Roles and Mindsets That Ignite Positive Change

by **Alyssa Gallagher and Kami Thordarson**



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## THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

*Design Thinking for School Leaders* explores the changing landscape of leadership and offers practical ways to reframe the roles of school leaders using Design Thinking, one step at a time.

Design Thinking experts Alyssa Gallagher and Kami Thordarson detail five specific roles to help school leaders to identify opportunities for positively impacting students, teachers, districts, parents, and the community: Opportunity Seeker (shifts from problem solving to problem finding), Experience Architect (designs and curates learning experiences), Rule Breaker (challenges the way things are “always” done), Producer (gets things done and creates rapid learning cycles for teams), and Storyteller (captures the hearts and minds of a community).

Leaders can shift from “accidental designers” to “design-inspired leaders,” acting with greater intention and achieving greater impact. *Design Thinking for School Leaders* can help you guide your school to the forefront of this pivotal change in education.

## IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to move beyond the conversation about change to making changes.
- How Design Thinking can empower all leaders and teachers.
- How to design and build the perfect team.
- How to reframe problems as opportunities.

### Design-Inspired Leadership

We are in the middle of major disruptions in almost every field, including education. With the world changing so quickly, how can we get to a place where schools are experimenting and able to adapt at the rate needed to keep up?

The role of school leaders—whether the principal or the head of school—needs a major disruption, too. What if leaders were able to approach their work more like designers? Designers see the world differently and therefore bring a new perspective to their work.

This new perspective is called *design-inspired leadership*, and it is one of the most powerful ways to spark positive change and address education challenges using the same design and innovation principles that have been so successful in private industry.

Design-inspired leadership is a shift from the traditional view or role; it is a dramatic move away from Leader as Manager and a move toward Leader as Designer.

Design-driven leadership offers opportunities for moments of impact, often unscripted and unplanned but still intentional. The mindsets are what help to identify these opportunities. They correspond to the five roles of leaders embedded within design-inspired leadership, which will help you move from an accidental designer to an intentional designer. Some roles may feel very familiar in your work, while others may be new. The five roles we will explore are Opportunity Seeker, Experience Architect, Rule Breaker, Producer, and Storyteller.

Regardless of our background and experience, educators are all actually designers with the common goal of making education better.

### Design Thinking

Before we dive into reimagining the principal role, it will be helpful to have a basic understanding of Design Thinking and some foundational design principles. Design Thinking is a process for problem solving and a method for creative action whose origins date back to the 1960s, when design methods and practices were being investigated as a way to solve “wicked problems.” These are those that are explained as “difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are challenging to recognize.”

Think of global warming or world hunger. In education, think of personalized learning, closing the achievement gap, or meeting the needs of multilingual learners.

All design thinking processes share the same foundational components of design:

- *Developing* a deep understanding of and empathy for users and their needs.
- *Cycling* through periods of divergent thinking to explore diverse sources of inspiration.
- *Learning* through quick cycles of prototyping, gathering feedback, and making necessary adaptations.
- *Testing* solutions with a small group and only scaling up after they have proved effective in meeting the identified needs.

The more you engage in the process, the more comfortable and adept you will feel at adapting it to your specific needs and context.

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### Empathy Is King

Empathy is king in Design Thinking. Empathy must be the driving force behind changes made in our schools. To effectively move our organizations forward, we must be willing to listen, compromise, and meet people where they are. Empathy allows for honest and transparent communication, which can be both frustrating and uncomfortable.

Opening the door for empathy allows us to engage each other in new ideas and build stronger relationships with those for whom we need to impact change. Because empathy is a skill that actually grows when practiced, let’s focus on concrete ways you can build that empathy muscle.

**Observe.** One of the first ways to build empathy is to hone your powers of observation and cultivate the ability to see what others overlook. You will be amazed at how much detail actually escapes us on a daily basis. Dev Patnaik, CEO of Jump Associates, a strategy and innovation firm, says, “The secret to good observation is to observe, get bored, and then observe some more.”

Challenge yourself to find something new in the mundane. Do you always spend time in the school office? What are you missing? Instead of sitting in your office, sit in the chairs usually reserved for those waiting to meet with you.

Settle in and observe. What new details emerge?

Consider shadowing a student or a teacher for an entire day and putting yourself in their shoes: walk the halls they walk, sit in their seats. What is their daily experience at school? The aha moments that you will get from this experience are worth the time out of the office.

**Actively Listen.** Another way to build empathy for those in your school community is just to listen—really listen—to people. Listen with your ears, eyes, and heart. Interviewing for empathy is an important step in the design process. The goal of empathy interviews is to have conversations with end users (students, teachers, and parents) that are fairly open-ended and allow you to identify their needs, both explicit and implicit. Be vulnerable. Empathy is a two-way street. Yes, a very important skill in building empathy is listening, but equally as important is learning to take risks in conversations. This can be hard as a leader, yet removing our masks and revealing our feelings to someone is vital for creating a strong empathic bond.

Now let's look closer at the five roles of leaders embedded within design-inspired leadership.

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### Opportunity Seeker

Innovation is often about seeing opportunity in the everyday and being able to clearly identify a need where you didn't know one existed. Where might there be unmet needs in your school or district? As an Opportunity Seeker, you recognize that each unmet need or problem may actually present incredible opportunities.

Problem finding is a skill that Opportunity Seekers have mastered. When a leader faces a problem, it is common practice to offer a solution immediately, asking few questions. But problem solving is no longer enough. How do we know that we are solving the right problem?

**Reframing problems as opportunities.** Positive reframing is taking what appears to be a difficult situation and finding ways to turn the problem into something positive. The power of reframing is that it forces you to harness your creative thinking to achieve new solutions. Instead of first exploring how to get the problem to go away, challenge yourself to ask, "What is the opportunity here?" If you still feel stuck, step away from the problem and come back to it using five questions:

- What am I actually trying to solve?
- What would happen if I didn't solve this problem?
- What are the hidden opportunities in this problem?
- What constraints have I imposed on this problem?
- What if I'm the problem? Who might be able to share new insights and fresh perspectives?

**Shifting perspectives.** When you're stuck on a problem and struggling to positively reframe it, try explicitly looking at it from a different perspective. This might be all you need to come up with a great solution. The ability to successfully look at problems from different points of view comes from empathy, which we explored in the previous chapter. You can practice shifting perspectives by finding the humor in the situation, getting outside your bubble, and using a perspective matrix. A perspective matrix helps you identify and look at the problem at hand from a minimum of four perspectives. General categories in schools include students, teachers, parents, and community.

### Divergent thinking: moving beyond the obvious.

Once you have a clearer understanding of your problem, it's time to get creative in your problem solving. In order to move beyond the obvious solution and into more innovative ideas, you need to practice building your creative confidence and divergent thinking skills. Divergent thinking is more than thinking outside the box; it's thinking without the box and figuring out how to create the structure later. Brainstorming is one of the better-known techniques that encourages divergent thinking, but there are also other techniques.

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### Experience Architect

An Experience Architect has been described as "a person relentlessly focused on creating remarkable experiences, a person who maps out how to turn something ordinary into something distinctive—even delightful—every chance they get." Being an Experience Architect is a key quality of any successful school leader. Think of the experiences you design every day for your teams, faculty and staff, parents, and students. Each of these presents an opportunity to turn something ordinary into something extraordinary.

Being an Experience Architect is, like many other elements of leadership, simply a set of behaviors and mindsets that you can learn and practice.

The first task of an Experience Architect is to prepare an environment where design-inspired leadership can flourish. One of the most difficult challenges in education is our posture toward the possible, which is directly tied to the type of culture created. How would you assess the culture of your school or district? Is it a culture of creativity or a culture of compliance? The way we lead determines whether our culture is creative or merely compliant.

An important job of school leadership is to encourage and reward creative thinking and collaboration, while also recognizing both formal and subtle ways those things are discouraged.

### Let's Design (or Redesign) Experiences

A great place to start is with your school calendar. What types of events do you have scheduled? Who is the intended audience? What is the purpose of each of the events? Does the event in its current form meet the needs of the users? How do you know?

Take “back-to-school night,” for example. Before planning what would have been her 15th back-to-school night, a second-grade teacher we worked with in California, spent time talking to parents and uncovered some interesting needs and wants. She discovered that parents wanted to get to know more about the teacher on a personal level, get to know their children’s classmates, and get a glimpse of a day in the life of their child.

Much to her surprise, this teacher discovered that parents were less interested in hearing about the Common Core Standards, textbooks, or assessments—all topics that are typically covered at back-to-school night. With this new information, she set out to design a back-to-school night experience that actually met the needs of the parents.

One of the most powerful ways to design an experience is to consistently wrap it around your why. People are more likely to move forward when they have a clear picture of where they are headed, as well as a clear understanding of why they are being asked to do something new.

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### Rule Breaker

Breaking rules with intention is really a mindset of thoughtfully challenging the way we always do things. Some of these might be written rules, but more than likely, many

may just be common practices that have existed at our school sites forever. Why do we require students to walk in straight lines? Why do we give spelling tests every Friday? Why do we use bells to signal time at schools? Why do we attend school for 180 days a year?

Some of these rules or practices may have been created for a good reason, but many have outgrown their usefulness. To move beyond the traditional practices at school, focus on creating a culture of inquiry. Following are a few strategies to expand your curiosity, start questioning, and create a culture of inquiry at your school.

**Seek surprise.** What type of surprise learning itinerary could you create for your teachers? What if you queried teachers on topics of desired learning and then surprised different groups of teachers with a well-planned excursion that supported their learning? A middle school principal secured additional funding, asked teachers what topics they were interested in learning about, and then provided registrations to conferences that supported their learning goals.

**Simple change, profound impact.** What is the simplest thing you can reimagine that will have the most profound impact? Is there something small, a practice or rule that has bothered you at your school? If so, investigate it using a simple one-two-three approach: (1) identify one simple rule or practice getting in your way, (2) ask why the rule or practice exists, and (3) modify the rule or practice to make a big impact.

**Question publicly.** Create a public list of things you are curious about. What questions might make your top ten list? For example, you might ask, “Why do we determine what a child learns and is exposed to based on how old they are?” Once you have your list, share it with your staff via a whiteboard in the staff lounge or, if you’re feeling even bolder, share your questions with your community in the school newsletter. Then get comfortable saying, “I don’t know the answer; let’s investigate.”

We all spend lots of time in meetings talking about change, but the best way to effect change is to act. We need to learn by doing and put our ideas into action. By doing this, we actually create knowledge in context, making it easier to shift conversations based on the knowledge that has been gained.

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### Producer

A Producer plays a critical role in many industries, including music and film. Producers must facilitate all the individual actions, then pull together the necessary components to deliver an outstanding performance. Producers are the connective thread that moves a project forward from start to finish. They must also protect the line, which means staying true to the vision, working within constraints, and taking care of their talent. They are not only responsible for shipping a final product, they are responsible for all the iterations and pivots in the production cycle.

Producers must practice innovation and agile thinking at all times. In education, we need our leaders to embrace the talents of Producers.

Producers are the ultimate power switches; they are constantly toggling between the big picture and the practicality of getting it all done. They work to make the impossible seem not only possible but within reach.

How do you improve your own ability to do so? If you are constantly working in the day-to-day details, you may find yourself wondering how to make sure you aren't losing sight of the big picture. Ask, what is the context? What matters most, and what is our purpose?

If big-picture thinking comes more easily to you, you may need to spend some time zeroing in on the practicality of getting the work done. Ask, "What are the most critical small steps to take to make progress on our vision?"

**Build a team.** Another strength of Producers is their ability to put together a creative and talented cast and crew. They are able to do this by leveraging their network and the relationships they have built over time. Producers are relentless about putting together the best team and will work across all silos, even reaching outside the team to secure resources if necessary.

**Create rapid learning cycles.** Producers are masters of creating rapid learning cycles for their teams. Because there is constant hustle and urgency, producers help their teams learn through quick and dirty prototyping of potential solutions. They are constantly cycling through the stages of prototyping, testing, and iterating. This runs counter to the culture in many schools, where the use of committees is prevalent.

**Take a break from committees.** Instead, think about

creating Action Learning Teams that meet for a specific purpose, do their best thinking, and quickly get feedback from others.

**Increase transparency.** During times of change, organizations that have built a culture of openness fare better. When working with teams in organizations that value open communication, people are less fearful of the unknown and more open to being transparent with their own work.

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## Storyteller

As a classroom teacher, one of the first things you learn in working with students is that story matters. Stories are sticky. They are one of the most effective and underutilized tools for learning.

As a leader, you are required to step into a storyteller role and, as with any skill, it is one that can be practiced and honed to inspire and create change. You can inspire people and students to do great things, or you can zap the creativity and inspiration right out from under them. Storytelling is probably the most important and powerful tool that you have available. How you wield the tool greatly influences the outcome.

## Crafting Your Story

Before embarking on a new storytelling journey, you must first understand the current story being told at your school. Whether you are aware or not, every person who walks onto your campus or visits a classroom leaves with a story about your school. This story comprises the actions of students and staff, overheard conversations, and artifacts, such as artwork and student work hanging on the walls. Everything taken in by the senses weaves together to create an impression and essentially become the story. Do you know what unintended stories your school or classroom might be telling?

**Define your intention.** What do you want to hear and see as you walk around your campus or listen to your students? Take a minute to sit and write or picture the story you want to tell. Define what students would be doing and saying. Think about what teachers are doing and what parents might be saying in the hallways.

**Walk it.** Take a purposeful walk through your learning spaces to see what artifacts are lining the walls. Better yet,

invite someone from outside your school to take the walk with you. Note what evidence of learning you see. Can you see students' process as well as the end product? Is their thinking visible? Can you see individual students in their work? Pay attention to what posters are on the walls, what signs line your hallways or are posted outside on your buildings. Do all the things you see tell your intentional story?

**Talk it.** As you walk through a classroom or school site, stop and ask for a story. Ask students to tell you about what they're learning—not what they're working on, but what they're learning. Ask teachers to tell you a story about the lesson they're currently teaching. Better yet, simply listen to the learning stories that teachers are using in classrooms. Are they inspiring learning? Some stories are crying out to be told. Listening carefully to the stories around you can give you insight.

### Design Your Team and Your Mindset

Because design-inspired leadership practiced by a team will have the greatest positive impact on changes in our school system, the line from challenge to solution won't be straight, and the work won't be done solo.

Design Thinking is a team sport that requires the involvement of every member on the team, and design-inspired leaders know how to harness and utilize that energy. How do you design and build the perfect team? Google, looking to optimize their teams, set out to answer that question in 2012 with "Project Aristotle." The group—comprising statisticians, organizational psychologists, sociologists,

engineers, and researchers—was tasked with researching and identifying the qualities that make up the best and most effective team.

The list of factors they researched was extensive, but in the end, they discovered there is no such thing as creating the perfect team. Teams that are successful are successful because of the ways they have chosen to work together. The team's norms are a greater predictor of success than the actual composition of the team. So in some regards, it is less about who is on the team and more about the ways in which members interact with one another.

Consider the following norms as a starting point if you need to create norms for a group:

- Assume best intentions.
- Be a learner, not a knower.
- Bring your authentic self.
- Take risks and choose to engage.
- Respect confidentiality.
- Play (and work) hard.

Through this journey, you will start to see your world differently and bring a new perspective to your work. While the tools and strategies shared above are powerful accelerators of change, none of them matter if the thinking doesn't change. Shift thinking first, then anything is possible. The more you adopt the mindset and realize it's not about following a prescription, the more successful you will be.



**Alyssa Gallagher** is an experienced public school educator, school and district administrator, facilitator, and educational consultant. She has led districtwide blended learning initiatives, helped schools create integrated STEM programs, and launched strategic plans using Design Thinking. She is constantly exploring "What if...?" with school leaders and works to support radical change in education.



**Kami Thordarson** has worked in many roles as a public educator from classroom teacher to professional development and curriculum designer. She is involved with the Design Thinking movement in K-12 education and in her current role as an administrator and school designer, is working to integrate design thinking and innovative strategies into the daily practices of learning for both students and teachers. **Gallagher and Thordarson** share their recognized expertise on Design Thinking, education leadership and innovative strategies, in presentations and workshops with educators throughout the United States.

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