Leah Buley:
Toward Collaborative, Pragmatic User-Experience Work

Jeff Patton

Leah Buley of Adaptive Path is someone I admire in the user experience (UX) field. I met her recently at a workshop, where she said a number of things that impressed me. I believe that the responsibility for understanding our users and incorporating UX concerns shouldn’t be segregated into a specific team role but should be shared across all roles. Something Leah said summed up my sentiments well:

*Design isn’t something that designers produce. Design is a process that designers facilitate.*

Leah’s right. UX people often have education, training, and skill that are valuable in software development. But for my money, using that skill to involve everyone delivers the biggest win.

In my following conversation with Leah, we discuss real-world UX and two simple practices that teams can incorporate to share UX responsibility, collaboratively and effectively.

**Jeff:** Leah, what does Adaptive Path do?

**Leah:** We’re interested in making technology in our lives simpler and more enjoyable to use. We do UX research and design—typically for things with screens, which can include software, Web sites, mobile phones, and consumer electronics. We try to create products that are ennobling and humanizing—not degrading and frustrating.

**Jeff:** Hmm. That sounds …

**Leah:** Lofty? Yes.

**Jeff:** Okay, what really happens?

**Leah:** [smiles] The dirty secret of UX work is that it’s at least 50 percent soft skills—listening and learning from people, whether business stakeholders, project teams, or end users. The other half, of course, is the design work. But the reality is that we spend a lot of time trying to understand constraints and find solutions that creatively accommodate them. That includes real-life business constraints, but also real-life people constraints.

**Jeff:** After you’ve worked with your clients and come up with a really fabulous design, what goes wrong?

**Leah:** Adaptive Path is primarily a design shop, so our clients and their technology partners are often the ones who do the building. In implementation, things can get interpreted in wild ways. It’s a natural part of the process that pragmatic compromises are made once the design is ostensibly complete. We expect this, so we try to provide principles and patterns that others can use to make appropriate choices even in our absence. But the risk here is the diluting of core ideas. As needs are discovered later, postdesign, they can be kind of bolted on. Designs should be flexible and support change. But, there’s a danger of drift—subtly shifting away from the design’s fundamental principles as the details are adjusted.

**Jeff:** What can we do about this?

**Leah:** I’m interested in getting organizations to be user-experience-aware. This might or might not mean hiring a UX professional. More important, it means getting everyone who contributes to the building of products to share a UX frame of mind. There are simple tools that can help make this happen. One tool is to create a set of design principles for the product.

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sonalities! Think about how you feel when you’re working in Excel versus when you’re using TurboTax. They’re both numbers-oriented products, obviously. In Excel, I feel like a master of numbers. I don’t know if it’s the tools, the formulas, the vast grid of possibilities in each and every spreadsheet. TurboTax, on the other hand, makes me feel guided, reassured, taken by the hand, and led through a confusing process.

What’s interesting about software is that when it does its job well, it makes you feel like a different person when you’re using it—a person you want to be. In Excel, I feel like I’m in charge. In TurboTax, I feel like I’m taken care of. Both are perfect for what they’re for.

Design principles can then be used by everyone who works on the product as a kind of litmus test—does this new feature support our design principles? If not, what could we change to make it so that it does? If you’ve got several ideas, all of which are equal in capability, which ones are more in line with your design principles?

Jeff: Can you give me an example?
Leah: Tivo has an interesting example. Here’s theirs (www.pvrblog.com/pvr/2004/12/the_pvrblog_int.html):

- It’s entertainment, stupid.
- It’s TV, stupid.
- It’s video, dammit. [sic]
- Everything is smooth and gentle.
- No modality or deep hierarchy.
- Respect the viewer’s privacy.
- It’s a robust appliance, like a TV.

They’re cheeky, obviously—but they’re at the intersection of what business wants and what users want. They suggest what the product should do, and something about what users want. They suggest what the intersection of what business wants and what users want. They’re for.

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A Simple Recipe for Design Principles

Set aside an hour or two to work in a small group. First, brainstorm about the personality you want for your product. Try completing these sentences:

- If our product was a person, it would be …
- If our product was a place, it would be …
- If our product was a neighborhood, it would be …
- If our product was food, it would be …

Look for examples of people, physical spaces, or other things that describe your product’s personality.

Second, after brainstorming these ideas, discuss them. Someone should be scribing, listening closely to important personality traits or characteristics. They’ll be writing down things such as “dependable,” “busy,” “fast,” “exotic,” “safe,” and so on.

Finally, with the ideas that emerge, craft five to seven memorable statements of what the experience of using your product should be. Tivo (see the main article) calls them “design mantras” because they’re short, simple, and evocative.

A Simple Recipe for Hosting a Black-Hat Session

Schedule an hour or two. First, take a half hour to walk through the product. Ask everyone to imagine they’re the pickiest, hardest-to-please vice president, customer, or user. They might say things like “Those fonts are the wrong size!” “I don’t like those colors!” “Those labels aren’t aligned.” or “Wow, it’s way too hard to do that.” Give them sticky notes to write on—one comment per note so that you can organize them later.

If you’re facilitating, start by pointing out problems you see in the product’s design. Pick real examples. Be honest. It will demonstrate the level of honesty you expect from your participants.

Second, after you’ve run your product through the ringer, take off your black hats and organize the criticisms. Cluster them by similarity.

Finally, talk about each cluster as a group. Is this an important concern? What could you do to change the product to address this concern? Leverage your design principles here.

This is the sort of advice I’ve come to rely on from Leah. ☛

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