

DIALOGUES WITH DESIGNERS ©

A simple format to understand complex problems regarding management in design studios.

CHAPTER 1

Where we come close to understanding the difference between a problem and an unpleasant circumstance of reality, and we work on the “lack of valuation of designers work by their clients”.

About valuation of work by clients¹

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Note: this is a fictitious conversation since I never record meetings with clients. However, they represent doubts present on a daily basis in the professional practice of designers that manage their own Design Studio, as well as those who work independently.

Who hasn't heard the wail “clients do not value me as a designer?”

This, and many other laments² are the excellent excuse for not owning and facing a situation that demands our attention: the XXI century shows us a context where the designer's profile has to change.

Taking charge and owning our professional projects gives us a privileged position: an apprentice slowly becoming a master.

Understanding that our problems are in fact the client's, we deny our responsibilities regarding their demands. This is not the attitude of a freelance designer or a designer managing his own studio.

These days, talent is not enough.

Pablo and Soledad are graphic designers and have decided to form a partnership, after working independently for a few years, to start their Design Studio.

One of the primary requests for building a Design Studio is to incorporate management skills that complement designers talent and creativity. These skills may develop or gather in by hiring other professionals.

They were introduced by a common friend (Santiago, also a graphic designer), since - despite the experience both have from working independently- they find difficulties to overcome several situations presented to them in the first stage of the Design Studio they manage.

¹ Del Vecchio, Fernando. “Mis clientes no me valoran, ¿qué puedo hacer?” At Foroalfa, February 2010 (<http://www.foroalfa.org/>).

² Brea, Guillermo. “El muro de los lamentos”; http://foroalfa.org/es/articulo/67/El_muro_de_los_lamentos.

Soledad: - I don't understand quite well how this kind of meetings or counseling, as my friend Santiago likes to call them, work. Is this about discussing the difficulties that we face as "entrepreneurs", as it is how these days designers that run their own studios are called? How are we going to work? Where do we start?

Fernando: - We can start anywhere. We can start with a problem relevant to you to discuss and then identify if it is in fact a problem or not.

Pablo: - I believe anything we tell you is going to be a problem...(laughter).

Fernando: - If you want, we can start with a list of problems you are having these days, to later on determine what ways we have to deal with them.

Pablo: - Ok. Since we started working together very recently... less than three months, I believe one of our problems is that nobody knows us as a Studio. Each, separately, has some clients, but together we have maybe less than ten active clients.

Soledad: - Problem is that we have to seek for new clients. I don't want to forget saying that, perhaps the biggest problem I have - at least I do- is that clients do not value my work.

Fernando: - What do you mean "they don't value the work"? What does that mean?

Soledad: - It means that we don't get paid what the task is worth.

Pablo: - Exactly. Also, they believe our job is to draw sketches. Another problem is that most times they know what they want (or they "think they know") and they just hire us to operate the PC or Mac.

Fernando: - You're hired as "design operators"...

Pablo: - Exactly. And honestly that really disturbs me. I did not study all those years to be treated like any nobody that calls himself a "designer" and the only thing he did is take a class on "how to use Photoshop". If we at least had a professionals association we would have better protection...

Fernando: - Maybe we need to see this *professional association* subject in another moment. What interests me now is to evaluate which, among all these situations, are in fact a problem and which are not.

Pablo: - All these situations are problems!

Fernando: - Well, let's explore the way you define these situations as problems.

Soledad: - What we are telling you are real problems.

Fernando: - Look, there is no such thing as a "real or objective problem", but interpretations of a particular situation from several points of view. Let's review the following: you evaluate that circumstance as a problem, but starting from a definition that I find most useful, that situation is not a problem.

Pablo: - So then, what is a problem? Or, using your sophisticated jargon (laughter): What is a problem?

Fernando: - A problem is a gap between an expected situation or behavior and a real situation or behavior whose cause (or causes), primarily, is unknown to us. Also, we must add that a problem must be defined as something we do not want but can control, taking action over any of the unsettled components that determine the problem. This means that if we have no

chance of taking action or controlling a situation we define as a problem, it is not a problem but an unpleasant circumstance of reality.

Pablo: - So, if I can't solve it, it is not a problem?

Fernando: - I'm not talking about being able to solve the problem, but the possibility of having some sort of control over the causes that determine that gap (the problem). If there is no way of making a particular situation a problem, which means putting yourself in a place where you can actually intervene, then it is not a problem.

Pablo: - So all I have left is to mourn and weep... (laughter)...

Fernando: - No, not at all. The idea is to find an aspect where you can interfere. Do you understand?

Pablo: - No.

Fernando: - To make a situation a problem means to find an aspect in which you have some sort of control, to convert that situation into a problem.

Changing the way we see a problem, we find ways to intervene. The first measure is to identify in which aspects of the situation we have any control on.

Pablo: - And which situation could that be?

Fernando: - Let's look at it within the lack of value clients give your work.

Fernando: - You have said that: "clients don't value our work". This could be translated as: "clients value my work when they pay the price I ask for in a work proposal". Right?

Soledad: - Yes, so far we agree.

Fernando: - Your original complaint comes from the fact that clients don't pay the price you propose, what leads you to understand that the work is not valued. Am I correct?

Soledad: - Yes, they always demand discounts, no matter what amount is in discussion.

Fernando: - And you always agree to provide such discounts...

Soledad: - Well... (resigned)

Fernando: - Meaning that you have never been paid what your work is worth (according to you).

Soledad: - Exactly.

Fernando: - From the way you are explaining the situation - locating yourselves in a place where you have no control over it to change it, the problems are the clients, the way they value both design and your work...

Soledad: - Yes.

Fernando: - And what chance of intervention do we have to solve this "problem", if what we expect from them -the clients- is that they change their behavior?

Pablo: - Putting it like that, I believe none...

If we believe the solution to the problem is resolved by expecting a change of conduct from the client's end, (for example, that the client understands our needs), we are waiting in vain. It is possible, but highly unlikely to happen.

Fernando: - We should analyze in what way we could see this same situation from a perspective that allows us some sort of control. Do you understand the difference between price and value?

Pablo: - I don't see any difference. Our work is worth what it's worth. And that value is measured with money. Period.

Fernando: - I believe this: you list your work at a price, right now I don't care how you figure out that price. That price is the quantity of money you intend to collect for that task. The value of the task by the clients end is related to the sentiment or appreciation the client has - subjectively - regarding the solution you will provide to his problem.

Pablo: - The client never knows what his problem is...

Fernando: - But if the client doesn't know what the problem is, do you think he knows what is the value for the service you are offering to provide?

Pablo: - I don't know... maybe not. But they always complain about the price being too expensive...

Fernando: - "Expensive" is a subjective evaluation. If the price presented on the listing is higher than the value that is presented with the solution, evidently the work proposal will be considered "expensive". You might say "the client does not value our work, therefore he does not want to pay that amount of money". Am I right?

Ambos: - Yes!

Fernando: - Ok. Maybe the problem remains in the fact that the value of a solution you present the client - according to the client - is lower than the price listed there. How do I control the "problem" in this case? Let's see the following case: Did you see what a mechanic does when you take your car in for a tune up?

Soledad: - I don't have a car...

Fernando: - Well, let me tell you. Before telling you the charges for fixing the car, the mechanic tells you explicitly everything that needs to be done to leave your car in good condition. What he does is...

Pablo: - Frame you...!

Fernando: - Maybe, in some cases. But this is where I'm going: he is trying to gain authority over you on the matter that you are discussing. That way, your power for bargain - parting on your lower or null comprehension of the matter - become lower. That is the first condition in order to understand the point where we can start working.

Soledad: - What? I don't understand what I have to do.

Fernando: - Picture yourself, in the presentation of your work proposal, in a position of authority, where the client can't compare you to his "nephew that works a PC and knows about design, and he can do this work for less money".

Pablo: - That doesn't mean he is going to hire our services if the price is not good for him.

Fernando: - Exactly.

Pablo: - Then we're right where we started.

Fernando: - Not at all, one thing is the client telling you he understands the proposal but doesn't have the money to afford it (which doesn't mean a devaluation of your work), and another thing very different is that he tells you that - since his nephew can do the work for less money - he offers to pay a much lower amount than the one you provide in your list.

Soledad: - So, the lack of value of our work from the client is our fault?

Fernando: - Not your fault. I would say it is your responsibility the way you handle the relationship with your client, from a place of professional authority, to avoid comparison that lead to a lack of value for both the profession and work itself.

Gaining authority in the matter means increasing our power to negotiate with a client. That way, we try to handle the subject of the conversation is the business proposal and the solution we propose for the client's problem, instead of focusing only on the price.

Pablo: - Above all, if the client does not have the money to pay... what should we do?

Fernando: - That is a commercial decision, and surely will depend on issues we will be seeing through time.

Soledad: - Ok, but, on what scenarios should we take this job, if it ends up being for much less money than the one on our proposal?

Fernando: - I would ask myself two things: Does taking this task allow me to improve my portfolio? Does it allow me to show my work to other potential clients? Is it possible that it lets me develop a commercial relationship in the future with this client, instead of considering it as a one time, poorly paid job?

If the client understands the solution we offer, but does not have the capacity to honor the price we request, the decision to take the job or not is ours, never the client's.

Pablo: - Ok. Before finishing, can we sum up what we talked about?

Fernando: - Of course. What we have seen is that the problems are not "objective", nor have an existence without noticing who consider them as such. For a problem to be a problem, we have to find a way in which we have some control of the situation. In the case where the problem is "clients do not value our work", the way of dealing with it is showing authority on the matter through listing the services requested by the client to avoid he compares us with whom he shouldn't (what in the end can devalue both the proposal and the profession). It is then when we see that the value the client gives is related to the authority he recognizes on you. If you help him see the difference between one proposal and another, the value he will acknowledge will be different. His disposition or capacity to pay for that service runs through a very different lane.

Soledad: - Alright. And about our decision whether to work with this client or not, if he can't pay what the task costs?

Fernando: - Great question... what the task "costs". What the task is "worth" is related to the evaluation responding to it's difficulty. If he can't pay what the job costs, the decision will lay on you depending on the relationship you want to establish with that particular client, and with the possibilities this task may provide you.

Pablo: - Perfect. Thanks for clearing that out. See you next time...

Fernando: - You're welcome. We'll see each other then.