

DIALOGUES WITH DESIGNERS ©

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

CHAPTER 3

Where Pablo and Soledad face for the first time the need to form their design studio leaving behind their association as independent designers.

Two independent designers working together do not make a design studio.

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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.

An important amount of design students and professionals intent to work independently (or associated with other designers) and start their own project (design studio). Some do it, within different degrees of difficulty, and a minority achieve strengthening this project as a company, agency or office.

However, almost all of them face the same difficulties and disenchantments when they try to build their professional project in an environment poorly explored and known during the years of studies: the feared market.

The process in which the designer embarks, the one to manage and become a designer in charge of his on studio, is new to him (or her). This is a complex process because **the required skills to think about this project and carry on with it are different than the ones used on the academic years.**

In the way of thinking about this project, getting it started and obtaining the first achievements and economical benefits, we face problems we were not expecting with the need to incorporate and develop skills we didn't have before. **To undertake a project is a process of on going learning.**

Pablo and Soledad are graphic designers and have decided to form a partnership to start a design studio.

Soledad is twenty four years old, graduated from a private university. She has worked in several studios since she finished her career (three years ago).

Pablo, twenty seven years old, is a graphic designer graduated from a public university. Since very early in his career he has worked independently (never in a dependant relationship), and this is the first time he tries to pursue his activities with another professional.

They have been working together for almost three months and have started to realize some difficulties they did not have before, when they worked independently or in a dependant relationship on a studio.

Fernando: - Some faces we have today!

Pablo: - Good morning... please don't start with your jokes today, we are not in the mood...

Fernando: - Don't worry, at this hour I'm not in the mood to make them either. I'm surprised that after our last meeting you never called or wrote to share any news.

Soledad: - What happens is that, despite understanding what problem means, and knowing what is a problem and what is not, we don't quite know how to carry on... and honestly, we would like you to give us the solution to the problem we have today. Until now we're doing good, sort of, or at least... we think we're doing good, but we have other urgencies.

Fernando: - Perfect. So tell me, what problem are you having... today?

Pablo: - The problem is simple, and I think Soledad already mentioned this on our previous meeting. The key question is: how do we get new clients?

Fernando: - Well, it's not an urgent problem but an important subject we are going to work with when you are ready to face it.

There is a big difference between what is urgent and what is important. It's normal to pay attention to what is urgent, because it holds the subjects we need to define on short term basis (during the day, for example). What is important is -among other things- what we have to manage or resolve (not necessarily during the day) to avoid being surprised by what is urgent every day. What is important becomes urgent when it gets delayed too long.

Pablo: - And when will that moment arrive? We started the studio three months ago and, despite each one keeps working with their own clients, we think it's a good idea to have some new accounts. Don't you think?

Fernando: - ...maybe...

Soledad: - What does that "maybe" mean?

Fernando: - Well, actually, I'm still thinking on what you said: "each one keeps working with their own clients..."

Pablo: - Of course... haven't we told you this before?

Fernando: - Let's see... can you remind me, please? I don't think you mentioned it.

Pablo: - The situation goes like this: right now I have five clients with whom I have worked with for a few months. You know for sure that I've worked independently for a long time...

Fernando: - Yes, I remember.

Pablo: - ... and Soledad has three clients... but one of them will stop working with her by the end of the month.

Soledad: - It's a client I finished a project with, there is nothing left to be done there. So, starting next month, I will only have two clients.

Fernando: - I find important to leave the following clear, because I don't think you are considering it: by getting your own studio started, the clients are the studio's clients and not from whoever brought them in. What I mean is, each of you can carry on with your client's projects, but at the moment of defining the studio's clients, there is no difference in what

each of you have brought. By the way you talk about it, it doesn't seem as if you have talked this through.

Soledad: - It is like that...

Pablo: - What happens is that we have no time to talk with the amount of work we both have...

In this moment, the difference between what's important and what is urgent appears. To talk about these subjects is important but not urgent (meaning, the conversation can be delayed). But if such conversation does not take place within the proper time to gain conscience of the consequences and alternatives to resolve difficulties, the subject becomes something urgent: it has to be resolved on the day where consequences are inevitable and impossible to prolong.

Soledad: - I think you are the one that has no time... I have been wanting to discuss the matter several times during these last few days.

Fernando: - These are the really important subjects. Surely, you have not given them too much importance, but the way you two relate and the way you solve the difficulties that appear, and will continue to appear, is key to the project's survival and long life. It is possible that in a long time you won't remember what or which was the problem you faced on a specific moment, but you will always remember if your partner mistreated you.

On the first stages of every new project it is important to talk about who the people involved in it will relate, on how things will be done, on how conflicts will be resolved. This makes the "how" important, instead of paying attention only to "what".

Soledad: - On my last job, the treatment was horrible. I remember that.

Fernando: - What I mean is that mistreat is an election.

Pablo: - It's just that sometimes... I don't know... it's like she doesn't think!

Fernando: - Ok, what is that about?

Pablo: - ... I don't know, excuse me, I know I should not speak that way.

Fernando: - Look, we are all different, we see problems different and we react to them in a different way. We all have different skills and that is where the potential of team work lays. Maybe you are more of the rational kind and she more of the emotional kind...

Pablo: - Yes, besides she has a creative sensitivity I lack...

Soledad: - Thanks, I thought I only contributed with problems.

A good team work is formed by people with different skills. For example, a soccer team is formed by eleven players with different features, to accomplish the task (and the goal) they set effectively, (coordinated properly by their director). It would not be effective if a team was formed only by eleven goalies (even if each of them was great at their specific task), taking in mind that the goal is to win the match and the target is to get more points (goals in a match) than your opponent.

Fernando: - Look, it is clear that having a long face or a bad mood - if you want to call it that way - is not precisely because of the "problem" you say you're having. I believe there is a conflict present and it is better to determine it now so we can move on to seeing why you need a solution to "get new clients".

Pablo: - Still, I don't see any problem.

Fernando: - But it is clear that there is a problematic situation. This is a very clear example of what we discussed on our two previous meetings on how there are no “objective” problems. Remember?

Soledad: - I do.

Fernando: - We haven't spoke yet on what and how much each earns monthly, if that is how you handle these things, and where does this money come from, but it is possible that Soledad sees a problem in that particular subject. What is this? For what I understand, the subject is that on a medium term, from the moment where this client stops working with both of you - and I say both of you and not her - if you haven't defined clearly what is the monthly salary - she could earn less money; you would not have that difficulty, but it is the studio (or the studio project) what resents this.

Soledad: - Well, that's what worries me.

Pablo: - And that is why we need Fernando to explain us show to get new clients!

Soledad: - Oh! So it is me the one who has to find new clients? We never discussed this...

Pablo: - It is more than clear! We are here today because of a problem you have. And the solution could not be clearer than learning to find new clients. This is clear, right Fernando?

Fernando: - Yes, absolutely, the situation is very clear, but it is not exactly as you're describing it, so I need to explain this to you. When you created the studio, which by the way, does not have a web site yet, each of you assumed a compromise. That compromise took the shape in a design studio, to which both of you brought - among other things - the clients with whom you worked independently.

Pablo: - That is correct.

Fernando: - Surely you also discussed the amount of time each of you would dedicate on the work, as well as some conditions to carry the project along. Am I wrong?

Pablo: - No, you're not. It was exactly like that. We discussed all of that. And I don't know why we have to talk about that again with you, if what we actually came here for are solutions instead of new problems.

Fernando: - Pablo, what happens is that we can't look for a solution if we don't know what the problem is, and what is causing it. Two meetings ago we started working in that direction.

Pablo: - No... enough gaps, problems and whatever...

Fernando: - For a moment and parting from what we talked about before, it seemed to me that was at least halfway clear.

Soledad: - ... let Fernando finish talking, please...

Fernando: - I was saying that once you decided to start the studio, even though you are still two professionals, it is the studio who should respond to clients, independently from who is supporting the projects of that client and who brought in that account.

Pablo: - Of course.

Fernando: - So, the loss of this client impacts the studio. This means it is not Soledad's problem, but the studio's.

Soledad: - So it seems...

Pablo: - This is exactly what I did not want. To respond to problems that are not mine.

Fernando: - Then we should define what are the actual work conditions, thinking of you as partners in the studio and not as independent professionals grouped in one entity: the design studio.

Associating with one or several professionals create a work dynamic different than the one we develop as independent professionals. This new work dynamic implies dividing the tasks and coordinating them. Such coordination is part of the “how” we discussed earlier. That is why how it is treated is important, but not urgent.

Pablo: - Well, let’s start there. It might be that having worked by myself for such a long time has affected me.

Soledad: - You don’t say? Really? As we hadn’t realized that by now...

Fernando: - The studio is a legal entity, an independent unity from you two. You bring the studio several resources - for example, work - and the studio provides you a salary as employees.

Soledad: - But, do we pay each other’s salaries?

Fernando: - The studio is what pays for your salary. Besides, as partners, shareholders or owners of the studio, you can share the profits of the studio, if there were such. I understand, parting from what you have explained on our previous meetings, that the idea was to develop a design studio as a company, not for both of you to work on your own within the studio.

Soledad: - It is like that... or at least that is how I wish it were.

Pablo: - Yes, absolutely.

Fernando: - Do you realize that by keeping the clients each brought to the studio, that working like this, independently from one another, the studio project doesn’t happen?

Soledad: - Yes.

Pablo: - ... Maybe... yes, I understand.

Fernando: - Good, then we need to define, for example, the salary the studio is going to pay each of you. Maybe that income is not what you are receiving today as independent professionals inside the studio, but it is a way to start working having the studio as your project, and moving towards getting new accounts as a studio.

In this case, the designer’s role carrying their studio is double. For one part, they are partners - or owners - of the studio. For the other, they are also the employees.

Soledad: - Have you noticed all the times you have said the word “studio” so far?

Fernando: - Plenty, I suppose. And you have not counted others...

Soledad: - (laughter). Yes, I have.

Fernando: - I think that’s good... How much are you earning approximately per month?

Soledad: - A minute to rest? How long have we been talking about this subject? Let’s stop for a second.

Fernando: - No, we will continue until we finish.

Soledad: - What a mean attitude! (laughter)... Well, I earn, approximately, three thousand five hundred pesos¹

Fernando: - And Pablo?

Soledad: - I don't know.

Pablo: - Three thousand seven hundred, more or less.

Fernando: - Neither of you knows what the other earns?

Ambos: - No...

Fernando: - Does talking about money disturb you? Is that why you constantly try avoiding the subject?

Soledad: - Yes, as a matter of fact it bothers me to talk about these things.

Fernando: - Is it like this with clients as well?

Soledad: - Yes... but that's something to discuss on another meeting, ok?

Fernando: - If each handle separate accounts, how do you pay the studio's bills?

Pablo: - Well, since we work at my place, we don't pay rent. And when the service bills arrive, we pay half each.

Fernando: - It is very important that you can separate personal bills from studio bills, since - as I told you before - you are independent entities or people. Until now, working that way might have been both positive and natural, but it has to start changing. Let's do the following, before working on the subject of getting new clients: for next meeting I need you to clearly define all the studio's numbers. That being: what are the clients of the studio? Who manages each of these accounts? What is, approximately, the income projection of the studio for the next four months, discriminated by client? What is the general monthly expenses of the studio, discriminated by item?

Soledad: - But that is administrative work! What does it have to do with designing? And again: How many times are you going to say the word "studio"?

Fernando: - (laughter)... I'll have to find synonymous. Does design "office" work for you?

Soledad: - Whatever...

Fernando: - OK, design company...?

Soledad: - Company? No, we're not a company... A design studio is not a company.

Fernando: - And now you're going to tell me the word "client" bothers you...

Pablo: - Speaking of clients, once again we left aside the subject of getting new clients.

Fernando: - Soledad, defining these things you call "administrative" is what will allow you to work in what you like, which is designing... what happens is that part of the work of carrying the project and management in any enterprise, even in the case of a design studio, is administrative. To be more exact, it is management work you can't delegate. And until you have the possibility to hire someone to do this kind of work in the future, the responsibility lies only on you. By the way... have you named the studio yet?

Soledad: - Not yet... we're working on it. It's just a lot of things to do!

Fernando: - The name is important.

Soledad: - I know...

Fernando: - When you have to present yourselves in front of a client, the definition of the name will be urgent. That is how you choose: important or urgent.

Pablo: - I already took note (laughter).

Fernando: - Ok. Let's keep working. See you both next time.

