

Experience-Based Co-Design:

A new approach to solving wicked problems

ABOUT RSP

Founded in Minneapolis in 1978, RSP Architects has emerged as one of the country's most trusted, diverse, and agile architecture and design firms. The firm's clients are a dynamic cross-section of established Fortune 100 global brands and retailers, innovative start-ups, thoughtful non-profits, government agencies, and more.

Dreambox was established in 2005 as a studio rooted firmly in a human-centric design-thinking process for non-traditional projects. Nearly 20 years later, Dreambox has developed a diverse portfolio that includes research, strategy, product design and branded experiences. Our work helps inform and shape the experiences felt by employees, policy-makers, patients and more.

INTRODUCTION

In a time and cultural landscape where it feels like the world is getting more complex and chaotic, the way in which we solve problems needs to evolve. As Albert Einstein said, "Problems cannot be solved with the same mindset that created them." Experience-Based Co-Design (EBCD) is a participatory research approach that tackles these "wicked problems" by reframing the way we look at issues through shifting to a human-centric, collaborative model. RSP Dreambox is a creative studio with 20+ years in experience strategy, and depth of knowledge in guiding clients and facilitating EBCD projects to uncover root causes to some of the most intractable problems.

EXPERIENCE-BASED CO-DESIGN FUNDAMENTALS

To define terms, Experience-Based Co-Design is essentially a change method and process that leverages a user-centric orientation with a collaborative approach. This participatory design method is especially useful when organizations are faced with complex, adaptative challenges, aka "wicked problems." These are challenges that don't have an easily identifiable solution, compared with a problem that can be clearly defined. When an issue is relatively routine or technical, there are ways to understand and diagnose the problem and focus on identifying a solution.

However, with a truly wicked problem, we need to take several steps back to realize the best path forward lies in the discovery process, which is necessary to unearth what the problem actually is. It is the learning phase that is the most critical to any EBCD workflow. As a result, the focus of the initiative may not be on finding a solution because in many cases, the problem itself isn't even clearly defined or understood at the outset.

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Furthermore, EBCD is unique in the way this methodology identifies root causes by utilizing the lived experiences of the intended audience as co-designers. Unlike other design systems such as Lean, Evidence-Based Design or Six Sigma, EBCD is a collaborative, participatory approach that focuses on human issues and needs, and ensures that project teams are working with their end users throughout all stages of the initiative. Co-designer engagement enables EBCD stakeholders to make decisions WITH those most affected by an issue instead of FOR them or AT them, bringing a critical level of equity to the process.

This can be a transformative approach for all participants. However, “EBCD is not for the faint of heart,” says Deanna Hokanson of Hennepin Healthcare’s Population Health, who is also a Six Sigma Black Belt. “It takes a ‘mind shift’ and that is not easy. By understanding the rich emotional landscape of a person’s lived experience, there is much more data and information to work with than you get with Six-Sigma and other innovation methods.”

Because of its ability to address complexity and chaos where human issues and needs are concerned, EBCD has traditionally been leveraged in the healthcare and public health services and spaces, focused on patient experience. Now, EBCD is being used in all industries by leaders who want to solve for a myriad of the interrelated challenges, namely mental health and burnout, hybrid work and loneliness, and the role of place, culture and belonging. Dreambox is seeing that regardless of industry, any adaptive challenge can be unpacked by using EBCD.

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EXPERIENCED-BASED CO-DESIGN IN ACTION

Recently, RSP Dreambox was privileged to lead EBCD projects with two entities who were facing their own wicked problems. Just before the pandemic, the Hennepin Heart Center, Hennepin Healthcare’s cardiology clinic, noticed data showing that African American men with congestive heart failure (CHF) who were also experiencing housing and food insecurities, trauma and substance abuse were suffering on many levels. But the data didn’t show why or what do about it.

Hennepin Healthcare hired the Dreambox team to pilot an EBCD program with a small group of CHF patients. The group brought together care providers from across the health system, health plan and social service workers, in collaboration with men with CHF as “co-designers,” to learn from each other in a supportive environment.

The co-designers were instrumental in helping the Hennepin Healthcare team understand that that people with CHF and many unmet social determinates of health needed much more than medications; they needed a truly holistic level of support that encompassed their mind, body and spirit. What emerged was the idea of a CHF Well-Being Center, a place where patients and their families come together to support each other, learn from each other and access the services and professionals who can address their changing needs.

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“This initiative has been life-changing for me,” says Hokanson. “For the past 20 years I have been innovating within healthcare and EBCD is different and transformative. We have been walking alongside patients, health plan members and county residents who live every day with CHF. Our ‘co-designers’ have led the way at every turn – from how the well-being center should look and feel to what services and support offerings are provided.”

Whatever the point of entry, the co-design process integral to EBCD is powerful but also challenging because it requires both staff and patients to renegotiate their roles and expectations.

DRIVING INNOVATION IN EMPLOYEE HEALTH & WELL-BEING

The CDC Foundation, the innovation arm of the Center for Disease Control, recently tapped Dreambox for another EBCD initiative, focused on developing evidence-based criteria that supports decision-making for health and well-being in the workplace. The CDC Foundation has been embracing EBCD work because the increasing complexity in the practice of public health. As Michele Bildner, MPH, MCHES® and Project Manager for Non-Infectious Disease Programs at the CDC Foundation states, “We have to use new approaches to unpack long-standing, unsolved, and unchanged problems and develop solutions to address them in our society. EBCD aligns with the public health practice focus on equity and justice in that it centers the intended audience as co-designers due to their *experience*.”

Throughout the EBCD process, the seven co-designers who represented different aspects of the ecosystem, including healthcare benefit providers, organizational leaders, and solution providers, uncovered a root issue of the adaptive challenge. The discovery centered around how health benefits and workplace policies are traditionally led by HR, but are not integrated with the aspects of the organization that influence culture.

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Healthcare benefits decisions in the workplace tend to be “top-down.” However, well-being requires a grassroots, collective approach to ensure needs are being met across an organization. Following this “ah-ha,” the team invited 20 other “co-designers” from various organizations to share their perspective on how to cultivate a culture of health and well-being. This feedback, combined with the work of the seven original “co-designers,” informed the CDC Foundation’s final report.

DREAMBOX LEADS THE WAY IN EXPERIENCE STRATEGY

The team at RSP Dreambox has been leading the way in experience strategy for the past 20+ years, with a focus on researching and shaping experiences. The team is passionate about work that creates experiences which promote a sense of well-being by leveraging authentic, meaningful connections. The goal of Dreambox’s work is to identify the needs of their users, and meet them, through intentional research and holistic, human-centered design methodologies.

Experience-based co-design is an extension of this decades long research and strategy expertise. Their process is highly flexible and the team’s experience as facilitators, guides and researchers allows them to focus on the client’s specific needs and meet them where they are along their journey.

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CONCLUSION

Experience Based Co-Design is an approach that is gaining momentum, providing essential insights and opportunities to truly understand and respond to the unique circumstances of each individual, while at the same time translating those insights into programs and services that respond to society's most intractable problems. RSP Dreambox's work has demonstrated that the key to this work lies in creating a human-to-human, compassionate connections. By doing so, we can leverage the insight and wisdom that each person brings to the table, creating solutions that improve health and well-being for everyone.

EBCD LESSONS LEARNED

- Participants in the EBCD engagement should be appropriately compensated for their time and contribution. This accelerates a sense of ownership.
- It takes time and diligence to foster the baseline of trust required to reveal, surface and understand the issues, especially with certain cohorts. It is difficult to circumvent that process.
- Traditional project/treatment milestones may not hold as much value as once believed. EBCD measures success by bringing to light the root issues and increasing the level of awareness that propels change in attitudes, beliefs and behaviors.
- Remain flexible throughout the entire process. This may mean adding or changing co-designers and stakeholders along the way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nancy O'Brien has 30 years of experience in the field of experience design and experience management working with leaders in healthcare, retail, finance, and technology who wish to measurably improve their employee & customer experience to improve well-being & performance of individuals and organizations. In her role at RSP Dreambox she helps clients to use the methods and tools of Experience Based Co-Design (EBCD) to innovate new models of care. As the co-founder of Experience Happiness, LLC Nancy co-created The Happiness Practice™ (THP) – an evidence-based behavioral health solution that measurably reduces the signs & symptoms of burnout and simultaneously improve happiness and its by-products: innovation, resiliency and sustainability.