Say One Thing, Do Another
A Story of Disconnected Workplace Culture

In her role as a senior bid manager at a multinational corporation, Stephanie was a key player in using design thinking to help with product development. As a process, design thinking incorporates an understanding of the people that products or services are being designed for, learns about their needs, and uses alternative strategies and solutions to develop solutions for problems.

This concept was something that Stephanie felt passionate about- she says it spoke to her desire to create meaningful solutions as part of product development. "That's what I always thought marketing should be when I was in college- but in the real world, it doesn't look exactly like that. So I was excited about design thinking."

In 2015, Stephanie had the opportunity to use this passion to design a collaborative project between her company and a local university involving design thinking. The company was trying to develop a better interface and reputation with the university, with a goal of attracting top talent from its graduates.

Stephanie often gave presentations at the university, and she struck on the idea of creating an all-day design thinking experience for a group of MBA students. This included a real-life problem to be solved for a client, and a meet and greet with executives at the company. So, she and a colleague worked together to make the idea happen in the real world.

Stephanie says the company was strongly advocating for the value of building connection between its separate departments at the time. And this project was an opportunity for her to do just that. Historically, there was little interaction between the separate areas and responsibilities. Her role involved talking to all the departments, and with this project, she was able to bring input from the sales team to the product development team and generate a collaborative project.

The project was a big success and led to her company hiring two interns and to some creative solutions for the client's design needs. The students' feedback was that it was one of the most exciting experiences they'd had as part of their school program. Due to this success, her company planned a second phase of the same project with the school.

It was during this launch of the second phase of the project that a leader from another department became involved. Stephanie says this manager was initially not interested all at, but when the company's chief design officer took an interest, the manager used

the leverage of her higher position to take charge of the project and all but wrote Stephanie out of the process.

"I became strictly a 'design thinking coach' within the project, under the guise of trying to reallocate responsibilities to avoid overwhelming me with too much at once," she says. "But I wanted the responsibility, I was invested in the project and saw it as something that could potentially be important for my career development."

Stephanie says that up to that point, she had always given everyone involved in the project credit for their contributions, but now the manager in charge and one of her fellow supervisors treated it solely as their own. "It was all about her ego and all about her looking good." This became especially apparent when a few months later, these two individuals were nominated for and won a company award for exceptional contributions to the organization based on the results of the project. "It was insult added to injury," Stephanie says.

"I became totally demoralized and completely disengaged from that point forward," she relates. What had started as an innovative project from her personal passion for her work was now just an unpleasant experience she didn't want to repeat ever again.

She did try, with the help of her colleague whom she worked with on the project and her own manager, to escalate her frustrations up the chain of command. But she says "in this company, despite their value of 'building bridges,' the left hand doesn't talk to the right." Because she was in one department and the manager that took over her project was in another, nobody seemed to be able to address her concerns- they got passed around from one supervisor to another and never went anywhere.

Stephanie says she thinks this is because ultimately, the true culture that was promoted was not one of collaboration like the company talks about, but rather a "culture of rewarding those in higher positions." She says "It matters more where you sit than your actual accomplishments, and too many people feel their reputations are at stake if they rock the boat."

In the end, she says she was told "to drop this and get back to work." Even when she got HR involved, the only suggestion was that she go to her employee assistance program for counseling. In the face of this, she says "I was depressed. I didn't want to participate in any projects, and it probably took me 8 or 9 months to get back in the swing of things and be productive at work again."

She says "I doubt the people involved ever even realized the personal impact it had on me. You can talk a great culture. But to affect lasting change in the culture at work, you

have to hire for and develop that culture. The people who have been there 10-15 years won't change. They don't even recognize the damage they are doing, to people and to innovation, while the company is telling them to 'build bridges' and they rationalize that's exactly what they are doing."