

More About Artistic Thinking in Business - Nunchi & Design Thinking

It is evident in the documentary 'Jiro's Dreams of Sushi' that achieving the best slice of sashimi wasn't Jiro's only goal. He was after satisfied clients. To this end, Jiro observes his clients, sitting them and arranging their cutlery according to their dominant hands. He also makes sushi based on each individual client's physical size so that not only would it not be overfilling for a small built lady, it also ensured that every client finished his or her piece of sushi at about the same time before he served another. Just watching that makes me feel that Jiro wasn't just perfecting the art of making and serving sushi; it was as though he was conducting a performance, like movements in a symphony or directing different acts in a drama.

This attention to detail is similar to the concept of Nunchi in the Korean culture, where from young, one is expected to be in-tune with how others are thinking and feeling in group dynamics. It means that one needs to observe and be keenly aware of the mood in every social setting and interaction, including knowing who isn't feeling upbeat, who holds authority, who agrees from the heart and who is agreeing but with silent dissent.

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The ability to observe intently, articulating what one observes and exploring connections and contrasts are all basic and vital skills in an artist's repertoire. With impressionist-style artists, a great amount of attention is paid to observing and capturing the transient nature of light, expressions of people and even the mood of the scene, while the Post-Impressionists are highly focused on emotions. I believe the link between such artistic abilities to the business world lies in the word 'Empathy', defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as 'the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts and experience of another....without being fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner'.

In fact, empathy is the first stage in Design Thinking and is the bedrock of Customer Discovery in Lean Startup's Business Model Canvas, where venture building teams are required to get out of the building and talk to real individuals in their Customer Discovery process.

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This is where we get to see if the teams possess empathetic skills or not. Many teams will come back with shallow answers and hardly any insights because they followed a 'question and answer' format of interviewing, without getting into the heads and hearts of their interviewees. The result? No insights to validate their hypothesis and they learnt nothing about their potential customer segments.

The risk of failure balloons when a venture has no insights from would-be paying customers. It is as though an interior designer designed the homes of his or her clients without their inputs- doomed to fail and any success is sheer luck!

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Being empathetic is equally important in our personal and leadership lives. With empathy we

- Notice if our colleagues are feeling down
- Celebrate with our colleagues when they are celebrating
- Refrain from talking about how exciting our day was when our spouse is visibly tired after his or her battle-filled day in the workplace
- Become aware early that a misunderstanding could have occurred between us and our colleagues, allowing us to act instead of being lost in the dark while the negative emotions pile up
- Pause and recognize that someone has something to say that could refine or enhance our own plans

Ready to be more empathetic? Let's chat!

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