Twitter Thread by Julie Zhuo



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A frequent question I get when talking with senior designers: Will my growth as a designer stall if I start managing?

There is often a second question underneath that, which is:
Will I no longer be respected as a design leader if I can't keep up as a designer?

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My short answer to "Will my growth as a designer stall if I manage?" is yes, absolutely, if "designer" is someone who produces design work.

Managing a 5-8 ppl team does not leave you time to design. When you don't practice a craft, you should not expect to get better at it.

However... (and this is a BIG however)...

What you *can* continue to grow (as both a design manager and a designer) is the following:

1) Your design eye
2) Your design voice

A strong design eye means that others trust you to know what is good.

It means your taste is well-honed through extensive study of an area.

It means your sense for usability, simplicity and aesthetics is well-developed even at subtle or fine granularities.

Very early in my design career, my manager asked me to review some design portfolios. I sat there, petrified, clicking through dozens of links. I could tell which ones were really bad, but many of the portfolios seemed good! I could not really distinguish between them on quality!

This was because at that time, my design eye was not well developed. I could probably score a design on a 'bad-okay-good' scale, but I could not grasp the differences between what made for 72 versus a 89 on a 100-point scale. I could not tell the exceptional from the merely good.

Developing a well-honed eye is critical for both designers and managers.

As a designer, your work is limited by how good your eye is. Your eye can be way better than your work—for many junior designers it is—but the opposite is impossible.

As a manager, you won't be able to hire or support great design talent if your eye can't distinguish a designer who does excellent work from one who does mediocre work.

There are three ways to develop your design eye:

1) Study the craft. Look at hundreds of examples.

2) Read or discuss critical commentary. Talk to the most obsessed people you know on the topic, and they'll help you understand what to look for.

3) Practice by designing.

Even if you don't do 3), your eye can develop through 1 and 2. There exist great movie critics or football coaches who aren't necessarily the best at making movies or playing football.

The next step after honing your design eye is honing your design voice. By this, I mean learning to talk about design work such that you can make it actionably better.

If someone shows you work, and immediately your eye tells you it's not where it needs to be, that's great, but now how will you explain it to that person?

Simply saying "This isn't good enough" is not helpful.

A strong design voice will be able to break down the why's and how's. It's the spacing that feels sloppy. It's the type hierarchy that doesn't flow. It's the animation that needs to be tweaked to make the experience snappier.

A master design voice will be able to explain the why's and how's not to just designers, but also to non-designers. They can effectively "translate" what designers care about to what executives, pms, marketers or engineers care about.

I know many brilliant designers who are not always effective at explaining why they feel something works or doesn't work. You can get by without being great at this skill (though you may be less influential in convincing or teaching others).

However, as a design manager, it becomes increasingly critical to know how to talk about design, including with non-designers. Otherwise, you can't be an effective champion for your team.

I'll conclude with one last story. Sometimes, people put me on "best designers" lists. I can definitively say that I am not a "best", or even great designer myself. I have been out of the practice for so long that there are legions of talented folks who will outdesign me any day.

However, I have spent countless hours with some of the best designers in the industry who have helped me continually develop my eye. I can talk about design effectively, which makes me well-suited to supporting and amplifying the talents and perspectives of the design discipline.

Whether you want to grow as a practitioner of design, or a manager of practitioners is a personal choice. I don't believe going the management route makes you less respectable as a design leader. They're different paths, with skills to develop in both.

The end.