



[Rana Florida](#)

CEO, The Creative Class Group

## Your Start-Up Life: Design Your Thinking

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Thursdays at the Huffington Post, Rana Florida, CEO of [The Creative Class Group](#), will answer readers' questions about how they can optimize their lives. She will also feature conversations with successful entrepreneurs and creative thinkers about how they manage their businesses, relationships, careers, and more. Send your questions about work, life, and play to [rana@creativeclass.com](mailto:rana@creativeclass.com).

From the newest app your kids play with to the mouse at your fingertips and the chair you're sitting in, it is quite possible that the consultancy firm IDEO was involved in the design or redesign process. Employing more than 500 experts, the firm has thousands of clients across industries spanning pharmaceuticals, tech, retail and everything in between. They helped Converse design a sneaker store and Walgreens develop a community pharmacy. They designed the first mouse for Apple and another -- a top-seller -- for Microsoft.

One of the coolest companies to work for by many [reckonings](#), the award-winning IDEO takes a design and creative approach to help organizations innovate. At its helm is CEO [Tim Brown](#), the author of [Change By Design](#) (co-written with [Barry Katz](#)), a book on [design thinking](#).

This year IDEO has been recognized with a Webby award, [13 International Design Excellence Awards](#), among many other accolades. It has been ranked in the top 25 most innovative companies by *BusinessWeek* -- and nearly all the other companies are its clients!

Brown's work has been seen at major galleries and museums, including [Axis Gallery](#) in Tokyo, the [Design Museum](#) in London, and the [Museum of Modern Art](#) in New York. He advises senior executives and boards of a number of organizations and Fortune 100 companies, such as the [Mayo Clinic](#), [Acumen Fund](#), [Eli Lilly](#), [Procter & Gamble](#), and [Steelcase](#).

I met Brown at the [Aspen Ideas Festival](#), where he was a featured speaker on innovation and design. He's also participated in the [World Economic Forum](#) in Davos, Switzerland, and his TED talks [Serious Play](#) and [Change by Design](#) have gotten over one million views combined.

An innovator that the most innovative businesses turn to for advice, Brown offers fascinating insights on creativity, design thinking and the birth of new ideas.



*Brown outside the IDEO Shanghai office. Photo credit: Courtesy of IDEO/ 老焯麟 LO CHEUK LUN.*

***Q: How do you find new ways of looking at things?***

A: For me, changing context is often the best way to encourage new ideas. Travel helps. Studying how people think about money in a different culture, for instance, gives me inspiration not only about that place but also the meaning of money in our own society. In Asia the concept of the extended family dramatically effects how people think about saving and spending money. Spending time there and immersing myself in that perspective gives me new ideas about better services.

***Q. How important is it to establish an organizational culture?***

A: My sense is that most companies that have sustained success (at whatever scale) have one thing in common. They have a clear culture that employees, customers and partners resonate with.

At IDEO we think our culture has been the single most important contributor to our success. Traditional creative organizations can be quite hierarchical, but this is a hard idea to scale, especially if you want to work on a diverse range of projects. We have tried to create an organizational culture where every individual is comfortable taking risks and exploring new ideas, but where they are also fixated on helping improve the quality of each other's ideas.

This ideal of doing great work and helping others to do great work has led us to be passionate about teaching, which has been great for learning and recruiting. It has also made us comfortable with teaching our clients how to do what we do and discouraged us from being too proprietary about our knowledge. I also think this approach has allowed us to successfully compete for the best talent in places like Silicon Valley, where there are plenty of other very wealthy companies interested in hiring creative people. I believe talented people come to IDEO because they see a culture where they can learn and create impact with other talented people who they will love being around.

***Q: What traits do you look for in team members?***

A: From a skills perspective, we look for depth and diversity. Sometimes this is described as T-shaped: people who have depth of 'craft' in a discipline such as design, business, engineering or the social sciences, but who also have a breadth of perspective and an insatiable appetite to cross disciplines and collaborate. In terms of traits, we look for people with empathy (because it is hard to design for others if you are not interested in understanding them), with creative imagination, with a drive to make ideas real rather than merely speculating about them, and, finally, with storytelling skills, because new ideas rely on great storytelling to get out into the world successfully.

***Q: How would you describe your leadership style?***

A: I am not sure I really think of leadership as a style. I try to be the right leader for the moment. Sometimes that means trying to inspire the organization with new ideas that might challenge the status quo. Sometimes that means jumping in and helping solve a problem with a client or IDEO team. Sometimes it means stepping back and leaving room for someone else to take the lead but being there to support them.

It took me a while to learn that approaching every leadership moment the same way is not constructive. Earlier in my career I thought my job was to try to always have the best ideas and I would strive really hard to be as personally creative as I could. Now I realize that this can stifle other talented people, and that I can be far more effective helping them develop their own ideas and giving them the confidence, if they need it, to go and make their ideas happen.

***Q: What do you look for in mentors or leaders?***

A: Leadership and mentorship are both services to others. It's not so much about being in control but understanding how to get the most you can from the people you are responsible for.

I guess I look for signs that leaders and mentors have that empathy gene and are not just interested in using their position to project their own needs and desires. I also look for leaders and mentors who are happy to 'get their hands dirty,' to jump in and lead by doing and not just by instruction.

***Q: How do you get your clients to buy into your mission of innovative and creative thinking?***

A: To be honest, I don't think you can get anyone to buy into the uncertainty of innovation through an intellectual argument. It has to be visceral in some way. The explanations help justify the commitment but they don't create it. We find that clients get to that commitment through one of two experiences.

Some come to it because nothing else is working. They are desperate to change their business, their organization, their relationship to customers and they realize that their normal approaches simply don't work anymore. As an example, several of the healthcare service companies (hospital systems) we have worked with initially reached out because one of their senior executives (or a senior executive's significant other) had gone through the system recently and had a really bad experience! The realization that their current approach to patient care was broken was what inspired them to consider a different, creative approach.

Others get to that point of commitment after experiencing the creative process (perhaps in a first project with us or maybe even a workshop) and finding the experience transformational.

They realize the power of new ideas to bring optimism to the organization. They realize the value of deeply understanding consumers and customers. They get excited by creating the future and realizing their own role in that process. Innovation and creative thinking are tremendously uplifting and rewarding experiences, even when they are also really hard work. This is what motivates an ever-growing number of our clients.

***Q: Where do you find your inspiration for new ideas?***

A: In addition to the idea of changing context through travel that I talked about earlier, I love history and science (and the history of science most of all).

I am interested in the design of complex systems and science, whether of the natural world or the science of complexity, is greatly inspiring to me. I believe we have to adapt our methods of design to accommodate the complexity of the systems we are designing for. Many of my ideas, such as the importance of understanding emergent behavior, come from science.

History is also important to me, particularly the history of technology, design and business. We can get very excited by contemporary ideas but I find time and again that going back and looking at what great historical figures thought, such as Buckminster Fuller, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Charles Darwin, or Peter Drucker, can be truly insightful and put things into perspective.

***Q: What are your thoughts on integrative thinking?***

A: As I wrote in [Change By Design](#), I believe integrative thinking is foundational to design thinking. The ability to hold multiple ideas, perspectives, or tensions in the mind and consider them simultaneously is necessary for the process of design.

The most skillful designers have an impressive ability to spot patterns, synthesize new ideas from fragmented parts, and to empathize with people different from themselves. Designers have developed techniques over the years that help supplement our natural integrative thinking skills.

Drawing, mind mapping, and prototyping are all examples of tools that help us explore complex interdependencies and resolve them into creative solutions.

***Q: How would you describe the design process?***

A: It can be quite dangerous to think of design as a process because that implies it is linear and standardized, neither of which is true. The reason I wrote about design thinking was to try and get away from the notion that there was one standard process. Instead I believe design is made up of a set of capacities and tools that are applied to a problem in a variety of ways, much in the way a cabinet maker knows when to use the right tool as he makes various pieces of furniture, even if he doesn't always use them in the same order.

The important thing to remember is that design goes from being divergent (the exploration and creation of multiple ideas or choices) to convergent (the analysis and selection of alternatives), and that it is iterative. We might go out and study users to get an idea about needs and then design a series of concepts to meet those needs in various ways. We might then go back and study users' reactions to those concepts so as to select the best ones. We may then iterate and redesign those concepts so that they better serve their intended purpose or so that they can be manufactured. We might test those more developed designs both with users and maybe also customers (such as retailers). And so on and so on.

More often today, particularly in the digital world, these iterations are going on live with paying customers, rather than in the lab. This is exciting because we get better feedback and it also reminds us that design is in fact never finished; that is always possible to develop and improve. Looking forward, I think consumers will get far more control over the of design the experiences they have in their lives. They'll need to develop the skills of the designer to make the most of that reality.

***Q: How important is diversity to an organization?***

A: If you believe, as I do, that the best ideas come from making new connections and seeing new patterns, then diversity becomes a prerequisite for creativity. The insights that come from people with vastly different experiences combine to create new-to-the- world ideas. As a faster changing world demands a faster pace of innovation, the organizations that know how to harness diversity will be the ones that are most likely to adapt and successfully compete.

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