

Jouni Ojala

**INFORMAL LEADERSHIP IN DESIGN**  
How UX and Service Designers Influence Decision-Making  
Without Authority

Master's thesis  
Information Technology and  
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Examiner: Thomas Olsson  
Examiner: Päivi Majaranta  
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# ABSTRACT

Jouni Ojala: Informal leadership in design  
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This master's thesis examines how UX and service designers influence organisational decision-making and enact leadership without formal authority in technology-intensive environments. The work is motivated by a persistent paradox in contemporary design practice: although design is recognised as a driver of digital transformation and cross-functional collaboration, designers rarely hold positional power in strategic hierarchies. Organisations frequently expect design to guide change, yet this influence is typically exercised through credibility, trust-building, facilitation and sensemaking rather than through command. This tension defines the research problem: how can designers shape strategic direction in contexts that do not provide them with formal decision rights?

The theoretical framework integrates relational, distributed and practice-based leadership with research on power, trust, facilitation, framing and socio-technical collaboration. While prior scholarship conceptualises leadership as distributed and relational, it rarely shows how these dynamics materialise in design work. Addressing this gap, the thesis investigates how designers influence decision-making; what contextual factors enable or constrain their influence; how credibility, trust and shared understanding are constructed in practice; and how these interactions contribute to organisational alignment and sensemaking. A secondary question examines how designers understand strategy and how their expertise could be more effectively integrated into strategic work.

Methodologically, the study follows an abductive, qualitative case-study strategy that iterates between theory and field data. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with experienced designers in Finnish software and service organisations representing varying levels of design maturity. Data were analysed using grounded-theory principles and complemented with persona synthesis to integrate cross-case patterns and illustrate different modes of informal leadership.

The analysis reveals a cyclical process of trust-based sensemaking through which designers convert expertise into organisational influence. The cycle consists of five linked stages, competence, credibility, trust, shared understanding and alignment, connected through transitions enacted by visible outputs, consistency and openness, facilitation and reframing, and collective sensemaking. Ethical reflection and integrity renew credibility for subsequent cycles. A six-persona typology, Facilitating Networker, Ethical Facilitator, Bold Storyteller, Bridge Builder, Reflective Change Agent and Analytical Materialiser, illustrates how designers enact these transitions in different organisational conditions, design maturity influences which personas thrive and where influence stalls.

The study contributes to Human–Technology Interaction by providing an empirically grounded framework linking relational and practice-based leadership with design practice. It shows that informal design leadership functions as a learning system rather than a hierarchy: influence emerges through dialogue, evidence and boundary-spanning artefacts. Practically, organisations can strengthen design's strategic impact by legitimising facilitation, sensemaking and translation as leadership work, recognising trust as leadership capital, and investing in design maturity to support psychological safety, cross-functional collaboration and reflective practice. The findings highlight the ethical dimension of design leadership, suggesting that moral awareness and reflexivity sustain credibility over time. Ultimately, the thesis reframes design leadership as a cultural capability, a way of organising through empathy, inquiry and shared learning that enables change.

Keywords: Informal leadership, design leadership, relational leadership, sensemaking, trust, facilitation, framing, strategic design, design maturity

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# TIIVISTELMÄ

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Tämä pro gradu -tutkielma tarkastelee, miten UX- ja palvelumuotoilijat vaikuttavat organisaatioiden päätöksentekoon ja toteuttavat johtajuutta ilman muodollista valtaa teknologiaintensiivisissä ympäristöissä. Tutkimusta motivoi muotoilukäytännön keskeinen paradoksi: vaikka muotoilu nähdään digitaalisen muutoksen ja moniammatillisen yhteistyön ajurina, muotoilijoilla on harvoin muodollista asemaa strategisissa hierarkioissa. Organisaatiot odottavat muotoilun ohjaavan muutosta, mutta vaikutusvalta rakentuu tyypillisesti uskottavuuden, luottamuksen, fasilitoinnin ja merkityksenmuodostuksen kautta, ei päätösvaltasta käsin. Tämä jännite määrittää tutkimusongelman: miten muotoilijat voivat suunnata strategista kehitystä ilman virallista päätösvaltaa?

Teoreettinen viitekehys yhdistää relationaalisen, jaetun ja käytäntöperustaisen johtajuuden tutkimusta vallan, luottamuksen, fasilitoinnin, kehystämisen ja sosio-teknisen yhteistyön näkökulmiin. Vaikka aiempi kirjallisuus kuvaa johtajuutta jaettuna ja vuorovaikutuksessa rakentuvana ilmiönä, se ei juuri osoita, miten nämä dynamiikat konkretisoituvat muotoilutyössä. Tätä aukkoa täydentäen tutkielma selvittää, miten muotoilijat vaikuttavat päätöksentekoon, mitkä kontekstuaaliset tekijät mahdollistavat tai rajoittavat heidän vaikutusvaltaansa, millaisin käytännön uskottavuus, luottamus ja yhteinen ymmärrys rakentuvat, ja miten nämä prosessit tukevat organisaatioiden strategista linjautumista ja kollektiivista merkityksenmuodostusta. Toissijaisena tutkimuskysymyksenä tarkastellaan, miten muotoilijat ymmärtävät strategian ja miten heidän asiantuntemustaan voitaisiin hyödyntää strategiatyössä nykyistä vaikuttavammin.

Metodologisesti tutkielma noudattaa abduktiivista, laadullista tapaustutkimusstrategiaa, jossa teoria ja aineisto vuorottelevat. Aineistona käytettiin kuutta puolistrukturoitua haastattelua suomalaisista ohjelmisto- ja palveluorganisaatioista, jotka edustavat erilaisia muotoilukypsyys tasoja. Aineisto analysoitiin grounded theory -menetelmän periaatteiden mukaisesti ja täydennettiin persoonasynteesillä, jonka avulla yhdistettiin eri tapausten välisiä toimintatapoja ja vaikutuslogiikoita.

Analyysi paljastaa luottamukseen perustuvan merkityksenmuodostuksen syklisen prosessin, jonka kautta muotoilijat muuttavat asiantuntijuutensa organisaatiolliseksi vaikutusvallaksi. Syklissä on viisi toisiinsa kytkeytyvää vaihetta, osaaminen, uskottavuus, luottamus, yhteinen ymmärrys ja linjautuminen, joita yhdistävät siirtymät, jotka toteutuvat näkyvien tuotosten, johdonmukaisuuden ja avoimuuden, fasilitoinnin ja uudelleenkehystämisen sekä kollektiivisen reflektion kautta. Eettinen harkinta ja itsearviointi uudistavat uskottavuutta ja käynnistävät syklin uudelleen. Kuuden persoonan typologia, fasilitoiva verkostoituja, eettinen fasilitaattori, rohkea tarinankertoja, sillanrakentaja, reflektiivinen muutosagentti ja analyyttinen konkretisoija, havainnollistaa, miten muotoilijat toteuttavat näitä siirtymiä erilaisissa organisaatiokonteksteissa; muotoilukypsyys vaikuttaa siihen, missä rooleissa vaikutusvalta vahvistuu ja missä se tyrehtyy.

Tutkimus kontribuoi Human-Technology Interaction -alalle tarjoamalla empirisesti perustellun viitekehysten, joka yhdistää relationaalisen ja käytäntöperustaisen johtajuuden muotoilukäytäntöihin. Tulokset osoittavat, että epävirallinen muotoilujohtajuus toimii oppimisjärjestelmänä, ei hierarkiana: vaikutus syntyy dialogin, evidenssin ja rajat ylittävien artefaktien kautta. Käytännössä organisaatiot voivat vahvistaa muotoilun strategista merkitystä tunnistamalla fasilitoinnin, merkityksenmuodostuksen ja tulkintatyön johtamistehtäviksi; ymmärtämällä luottamuksen johtajuuspääomaksi; ja kehittämällä muotoilukypsyttä psykologisen turvallisuuden, moniammatillisen yhteistyön ja reflektiivisen oppimisen edellytyksenä. Lopulta tutkielma hahmottaa muotoilujohtajuuden kulttuurisena kykynä, joka mahdollistaa muutoksen.

Avainsanat: epämuodollinen johtajuus, relationaalinen johtajuus, merkityksenmuodostus, luottamus, fasilitointi, kehystäminen, strateginen muotoilu, muotoilukypsyys

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# PREFACE

This thesis marks the culmination of my studies in Human–Technology Interaction at Tampere University and my professional journey as a designer and product manager. The work has been both an academic and personal exploration of how designers lead through collaboration, empathy and sensemaking rather than authority.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Tampere University for providing an environment that values curiosity, reflection and interdisciplinary thinking, including fellow students and teachers, who helped me build my expertise by supporting and challenging me on the way. My thanks also go to all the interview participants whose insights and openness made this study possible. Their experiences continue to shape my understanding of leadership in design.

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# LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial intelligence
HCD	Human-centered design
IT	Information technology
KPI	Key performance indicator
LAP	Leadership-as-Practice
LaaS	Leadership-as-a-Service
NN/g	Nielsen Norman Group (Nielsen Norman Group,)
PO	Product Owner
STS	Science and Technology Studies
UI	User interface
UX	User experience

# 1. INTRODUCTION

As organisations become increasingly interconnected, data-driven and technology-mediated, the importance of user experience (UX) and service design has grown significantly. Over the past two decades, design has expanded from visual refinement into a strategic capability that shapes digital services, customer experience and socio-technical systems. Despite this development, many designers continue to work in roles with limited positional authority, short delivery cycles and weak strategic integration. This paradox, design work gaining strategic relevance while designers themselves lack formal decision-making power, forms the central motivation for this thesis.

Designers are frequently placed in cross-functional product teams operating under agile or hybrid delivery models. In such environments, formal authority typically resides with product, business or engineering leadership. Designers contribute through research, facilitation, prototyping and visualisation, yet their influence depends heavily on organisational culture, leadership norms and the maturity of the design function. In low design maturity contexts, design may still be viewed as aesthetics or interface polish; in higher-maturity environments, designers are expected to guide problem framing and support strategic alignment. These variations create an ongoing tension between the expectations placed on designers and the structures that define their influence.

Industry reports highlight this structural imbalance. Research by the Design Council (2021) and McKinsey Design (2018) suggests that organisations integrating design leadership into strategy outperform their peers across business and innovation metrics. Yet in practice, few organisations offer designers formal strategic authority. Designers themselves often describe influencing through informal mechanisms, credibility, trust, framing, storytelling and the creation of artefacts that make complexity visible, rather than through command or hierarchy. This raises a conceptual and practical question: *How do designers lead when they are not in charge?*

At the same time, the role of design is shifting. As digital products grow into ecosystems and organisational challenges become increasingly systemic, designers are expected to interpret complexity, mediate across disciplinary boundaries and shape shared understanding. This move from tactical delivery to organisational sensemaking has intensified discussions within the design community about the “seat at the table” challenge: How can design participate meaningfully in strategic decision-making?

This thesis approaches these issues from the perspective of human-centred design (HCD) professionals operating in digital product and service contexts. While many individuals engage in design-related activities, formally trained UX and service designers integrate behavioural insight, technological understanding and ethical awareness into socio-technical problem solving. Their work reflects a systematic, iterative and empathic design thinking approach (Brown, 2009) that emphasises evidence, collaboration and purposeful intervention. Understanding how such professionals influence without authority is therefore crucial for both design practice and organisational development.

## **1.1 Motivation behind the thesis**

This study is motivated by three interrelated observations. First, organisations increasingly expect designers to contribute to strategy, by framing problems, aligning stakeholders and guiding decision-making under uncertainty, yet designers rarely possess formal power to do so. Influence unfolds informally through credibility, facilitation, translation and relationship-building.

Second, although leadership research has recognised distributed, relational and practice-based leadership, little empirical work has examined how these concepts manifest in design work. There remains a gap in understanding the everyday mechanisms through which designers exert influence without authority.

Third, design’s rising organisational role has created a professional identity tension: designers are expected to act as strategic contributors while simultaneously delivering rapid outputs within agile structures. Understanding how designers navigate this dual role is essential for strengthening the strategic contribution of design.

Together, these observations highlight a need to clarify the nature of informal leadership in design, the conditions that support it and the practices through which it is enacted.

## **1.2 Assumptions**

This thesis proceeds from four assumptions grounded in prior research and professional experience:

1. Designers influence decision-making without formal authority, but the extent of this influence is shaped by organisational structures, leadership culture and design maturity.
2. Designers may not fully recognise their own avenues of strategic influence; when design competence is viewed narrowly as operational, its strategic contribution remains undervalued.
3. Organisational culture and management practices significantly shape designers' expert power, requiring clearer role definitions and cross-boundary collaboration aligned with contemporary leadership models.
4. Design methods can be used more systematically as tools of lateral influence; facilitation, co-design, evidence-building and translation support informal leadership when applied intentionally.

These assumptions guided both the research design and the interpretation of empirical findings.

## **1.3 Objectives**

Building on the motivation and assumptions above, this thesis seeks to explain how designers exercise informal leadership and how design competence becomes organisational influence.

The primary objective is to examine the mechanisms, conditions and practices through which designers affect decision-making in environments where formal authority is limited. A secondary objective is to understand how designers experience strategy and how design expertise can more effectively contribute to organisational strategy work.

Although prior research has examined distributed and relational forms of leadership, less is known about how these dynamics unfold in design work, where influence is enacted primarily through expertise, facilitation and sensemaking. Existing studies address design's strategic value at a high level but offer limited insight into the everyday practices through which designers shape decisions in environments where formal authority is constrained. This creates a gap in understanding the mechanisms, conditions and behaviours that enable informal leadership in contemporary UX and service design contexts.

These aims are expressed in the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do UX and service designers influence organisational decision-making without formal authority?
  - RQ1a: What contextual factors (e.g., organisational structure, design maturity, leadership culture) enable or constrain this influence?
  - RQ1b: What methods, interactions and behaviours do designers use to build credibility, trust and shared understanding across disciplines?
  - RQ1c: How do these practices contribute to strategic alignment and the broader organisational sensemaking process?
- RQ2: How do designers perceive strategy and strategic design, and how could their expertise be more effectively utilised in organisational strategy work?

By addressing these questions, the thesis seeks to clarify how informal leadership in design operates in practice and how designers' expertise can contribute more coherently to organisational strategy. To support this examination, the thesis progresses from conceptual foundations to empirical analysis and finally to theoretical and practical implications.

The remainder of this thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the theoretical foundations of informal leadership, expert power, cross-functional collaboration and design as sensemaking. Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative research design, data collection and analysis methods. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings, followed by Chapter 5, which interprets these results in relation to existing

literature and discusses their implications for design and leadership practice. Chapter 6 concludes with the main contributions, limitations and suggestions for future work.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To examine how designers influence organisational decision-making without formal authority, this chapter synthesises theoretical perspectives that explain the social, organisational and systemic conditions of informal leadership. The discussion begins with relational and distributed leadership theories, which conceptualise leadership as a shared, interactional process. It then turns to contemporary views of power, credibility and trust as foundations of influence in knowledge-intensive environments. The chapter continues by considering how design maturity and organisational structures shape the scope of designers' involvement, before finally examining strategic and sociotechnical perspectives that position design as a form of interpretive and system-oriented practice. Together, these domains establish the conceptual grounding for the empirical analysis that follows.

### 2.1 Relational and distributed leadership

Leadership research provides the first foundation for this study by explaining how influence emerges in contemporary, knowledge-intensive environments. Contemporary leadership scholarship increasingly views leadership not as a personal trait or formal role but as a relational, distributed, and practice-based phenomenon enacted through everyday interaction. This perspective resonates strongly with knowledge-intensive, cross-functional environments where authority is diffuse, and influence emerges through expertise, coordination, and sensemaking rather than positional power. Building on this broader shift in how leadership is understood, relational perspectives provide a more detailed view of how influence emerges through the quality of interpersonal connections.

Relational Leadership Theory conceptualises leadership as the joint accomplishment of people working together, mediated through trust, reciprocity, and mutual influence (Uhl-Bien, 2006) From this perspective, leadership is embedded in the quality of relationships rather than in the hierarchy of roles. It arises when actors create psychological safety, demonstrate competence, and invite others into shared reflection, conditions that parallel the first stages of the empirical cycle

identified in this study, where designers emphasised credibility and trust as foundational to influencing team conversations. While relational approaches emphasise the interpersonal foundations of influence, distributed perspectives extend the analysis to the collective structures and interdependencies through which leadership is shared.

Distributed leadership further shifts focus away from individual leaders to interdependent networks of people, practices, and artefacts (Gronn, 2002). Leadership is produced collectively when different actors contribute complementary expertise to a shared task. In digital product and service organisations, this implies that designers, developers, product owners, data analysts, and managers all participate in leadership episodes depending on the situation. This aligns with participants' accounts of stepping into leadership roles during ambiguity, facilitation moments, or cross-functional tensions, even when formal authority resided elsewhere. Although distributed leadership highlights the diffusion of influence across actors, practice-oriented viewpoints further specify how leadership is accomplished through situated activities.

The Leadership-as-Practice (LAP) perspective builds on relational and distributed views by examining what people do together, framing problems, structuring dialogue, mediating conflicts, and coordinating decision-making (Crevani, et al., 2010; Raelin, 2011). Leadership is located in the situated practices that enable groups to make sense of complex situations and move toward action. This closely reflects the designer behaviours identified in the empirical analysis: facilitating co-creation sessions, visualising issues to clarify thinking, offering interpretive scaffolds, and enabling others to see connections between user needs, technical feasibility, and business goals. In addition to these action-oriented accounts, discursive perspectives highlight the linguistic and symbolic dimensions through which meaning and direction are negotiated.

Discursive leadership complements these practice-oriented views by emphasising how leadership is enacted through language, framing, metaphor, and narrative (Fairhurst, 2007). In this perspective, leadership involves shaping how situations are understood, defining "what is going on," which problems matter, and which courses of action are legitimate. Designers frequently engaged in this interpretive work in the empirical material: reframing research avoidance as risk,

using scenarios to shift team perspectives, or translating between professional vocabularies. These discursive moves often marked turning points in decision-making despite designers lacking formal decision rights. These interpretive processes also intersect with the ethical foundations of influence, which shape how credibility and responsibility are established in collaborative work.

Although this thesis does not rely on classic transformational-leadership theory, the ethical dimension of influence it highlights is nonetheless relevant. Transformational perspectives emphasise purpose, moral responsibility, and integrity as sources of influence (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Burns, 1978). Designers in this study often described acting as ethical stewards in situations involving user impact, inclusivity, or system-level consequences. Their credibility and influence were strengthened when colleagues perceived them as principled, transparent, and user-focused, features consistent with relational and adaptive forms of value-driven leadership. Combined, these views illustrate how leadership unfolds through relational, discursive, and ethical practices, forming the backdrop for understanding how power, credibility, and trust operate in organisations.

## **2.2 Power, credibility, and trust**

While leadership theories explain how influence unfolds through relationships and shared activity, organisational power dynamics clarify *why* certain actors can shape decisions more than others. Contemporary views emphasise informal, symbolic, and relational forms of power that operate alongside or instead of formal authority. Here we examine the foundations of such influence, focusing on credibility, trust, and the mechanisms through which designers gain legitimacy.

Power is a fundamental condition for action in organisations. While formal authority grants the right to decide, much of the influence exercised in contemporary, knowledge-intensive settings operates through informal and relational mechanisms. Power emerges through expertise, credibility, framing, and the capacity to shape collective interpretations rather than through control over resources or hierarchy (Pfeffer, 1992; Pfeffer, 2022). These forms of influence are inherently situational, distributed, and negotiated in the flow of everyday work.

For designers, whose work spans disciplinary, organisational, and domain boundaries, informal power is particularly salient. They rarely occupy positions of

formal authority, yet their contributions to problem framing, priority-setting, and team alignment indicate that influence flows through other channels: the knowledge they hold, the artefacts they create, and the relationships they build. Understanding power as relational and symbolic provides a foundation for analysing these dynamics.

### **2.2.1 Relational and symbolic power**

Relational conceptions of power highlight that individuals gain influence when they are perceived as competent, reliable, and trustworthy. Expertise and information are potent sources of informal power, particularly when they help reduce uncertainty or illuminate aspects of a problem that others cannot access. Designers often exercise expert power through design research, systems understanding, and user insight, and informational power through the visual and material artefacts they produce.

Symbolic dimensions of power are equally important. Artefacts, diagrams, prototypes, and narratives act as representational tools that influence what becomes visible, discussable, or legitimate in decision-making (Suchman, 2007). By reframing issues, making hidden assumptions explicit, or translating complex problems into shareable representations, designers shape how others understand a situation. This symbolic form of influence is subtle yet consequential: framing becomes a political act through which actors' direct attention and enable or constrain courses of action.

### **2.2.2 Leadership capital**

Informal influence often depends on what Cohen and Bradford (1990) term influence currencies, the valued resources individuals contribute in exchange for cooperation. For designers, these currencies typically include user evidence, visual synthesis, strategic reframing, or facilitation that reduces ambiguity for others. Influence emerges when these contributions are viewed as legitimate and valuable.

Such reciprocal exchanges, however, operate most effectively when grounded in credibility and moral authority rather than mere transaction. Authenticity, consistency, and principled reasoning enhance trust, enabling others to rely on the

designer's judgment even in ambiguous or politically sensitive situations. Empathy, ethical awareness, and a reputation for fairness help sustain long-term legitimacy and differentiate influence from manipulation or persuasion. These forms of leadership capital, expertise, relational reliability, and value-based intent, are central to understanding how designers mobilise others without formal authority.

### **2.2.3 Ethical foundations of informal power**

Research on power distinguishes between dominance-based influence, which relies on coercion or positional control, and prestige-based influence, which is granted voluntarily in recognition of competence, integrity, and trustworthiness (Kim & Guinote, 2021). Prestige-based power tends to foster more stable collaboration because it aligns with relational norms and collective interests rather than fear or compliance.

For designers, ethical steadiness is often an implicit ingredient of influence. Their work foregrounds human needs, fairness, and long-term impact, and colleagues frequently look to them to raise concerns that might otherwise go unspoken. Acting with transparency, acknowledging uncertainty, and maintaining consistency in values strengthens trust and supports the interpretive work that design involves. Ethical influence is thus neither peripheral nor optional; it is a sustaining condition for informal leadership in complex organisations.

### **2.2.4 Cultural power distance**

Power is also shaped by cultural expectations about hierarchy, authority, and participation. Hofstede's cultural dimension of power distance describes the degree to which societies accept unequal distributions of power and the extent to which hierarchy is institutionalised or challenged (Hofstede, 2001). In low-power-distance cultures, such as the Nordic countries, authority tends to be decentralised, hierarchies are relatively flat, and employees are encouraged to question assumptions and participate actively in decision-making. Research in cross-cultural organisational behaviour confirms that members of such cultures expect egalitarian interaction, open dialogue, and shared responsibility (House, et al., 2004).

In high–power-distance contexts, by contrast, questioning established frames or initiating cross-functional dialogue may be perceived as challenging authority. The kinds of facilitative, sensemaking, and boundary-spanning practices commonly associated with distributed or informal leadership are less readily accepted, and organisational members may defer to positional authority even when they possess relevant expertise (House, et al., 2004). Studies of distributed leadership emphasise that lateral influence depends strongly on cultural openness to non-positional authority and shared decision-making (Bolden, et al., 2016).

Recognising these cultural differences helps clarify why certain relational and facilitative leadership behaviours, particularly those reliant on trust, credibility, and participatory sensemaking, flourish more readily in egalitarian, low–power-distance environments. It also highlights why similar behaviours may be constrained or interpreted differently in more hierarchical settings, where formal authority plays a stronger role in structuring participation and legitimacy. Because power and trust are always embedded in organisational structures, it is essential to consider how the institutionalisation of design shapes opportunities for influence.

### **2.3 Design maturity and organisational conditions**

Influence is also shaped by the organisational context in which designers operate. Design maturity frameworks help explain how organisations interpret the role of design, the access designers have to strategic conversations, and the legitimacy afforded to their methods. This section outlines how maturity levels create different conditions for informal leadership.

Design maturity describes the degree to which design capabilities, processes, and values are embedded within an organisation’s culture and decision-making structures. Maturity models, such as the Danish Design Ladder and the NN/g UX Maturity Model, frame this progression from ad-hoc or surface-level design toward deeply integrated, strategic practice (Pernice, et al., 2024; Wrigley & Straker, 2015).

In organisations with low design maturity, design is often associated with late-stage refinement or aesthetics. Designers must repeatedly justify their involvement and demonstrate their relevance in shaping direction. Informal leadership

under such conditions often requires persistence, visible wins, and careful negotiation of access.

In maturing contexts, design contributes to problem framing, qualitative insight generation, and cross-functional collaboration. Designers begin to participate in early-phase exploration, and their artefacts and processes increasingly support collective decision-making.

In high-maturity cultures, design is understood as a strategic capability. Designers are invited into early, ambiguous problem spaces and are trusted to facilitate inquiry, alignment, and experimentation. Such organisations have established structures, rituals, tools, shared vocabularies, that amplify designers' influence by institutionalising collaborative and reflective practices.

Design maturity therefore provides essential context for understanding how informal leadership manifests. It shapes the scope of issues designers can influence, the credibility afforded to their methods, and the degree to which collaborative sensemaking is supported or constrained. As design maturity increases, designers become more involved in shaping direction, drawing attention to their role within strategic and sociotechnical systems.

## **2.4 Strategic design in sociotechnical systems**

Strategic design offers a perspective on how design contributes to organisational direction by helping actors interpret complexity, explore alternatives, and structure collective inquiry. Contemporary strategy highlights diagnosis, coherence, and adaptive action (Rumelt, 2017; Lafley & Martin, 2013), while design scholarship emphasises problem framing and the co-evolution of problems and solutions (Buchanan, 1992; Dorst, 2015). A sociotechnical view further positions design within interdependent systems of technologies, practices, and institutional arrangements (Suchman, 2007), and political analyses show how choices about representation and participation shape organisational meaning and legitimacy (Verbeek, 2011; Li, 2007). Together this literature frames strategic design as an interpretive, system-oriented practice situated at the intersection of strategy, technology, and organisational politics, a foundation elaborated in the following subsections.

### **2.4.1 Strategy and strategic design**

Strategy has shifted from linear planning toward more adaptive, diagnostic, and participatory approaches. Contemporary strategy emphasises identifying the central problem or “crux” (Rumelt, 2023), confronting uncertainty through evidence and experimentation (McGrath, 2013), and constructing coherent action through deliberate choices (Lafley & Martin, 2013). These orientations resonate closely with design practice, which also privileges inquiry, framing, iteration, and collaborative testing.

Strategic design provides tools for shaping upstream decision-making. By reframing issues, surfacing constraints, and visualising dependencies, designers help organisations clarify what matters and explore alternative courses of action. Through co-creation, mapping, prototyping, and narrative synthesis, designers enact strategy as a participatory process rather than a top-down mandate.

### **2.4.2 Technology as a mediator of power**

From a sociotechnical viewpoint, technologies shape organisational decision-making by making certain phenomena visible and others invisible. Interfaces, infrastructures, algorithms, and information flows embed assumptions about participation, authority, and accountability (Winner, 1980; Akrich & Latour, 1992). Designers frequently engage in mediating these assumptions: revealing hidden dependencies, clarifying constraints, and translating between technical possibilities and human needs.

Prototypes, diagrams, and visualisations play an important role in this mediation. They expose tensions, align interpretations, and provide shared anchors for discussion. Such artefacts help teams confront systemic constraints or trade-offs, enabling more informed and transparent decision-making. These dynamics highlight why design practice serves as a form of informal governance through representation and translation.

### **2.4.3 Design as political framing**

Design decisions carry political significance because they influence whose perspectives are included, which problems are recognised, and what solutions appear feasible. Framing is a central mechanism of this political agency: by defining what a situation means and how it should be interpreted, designers shape the terms of organisational discourse (Li, 2007; Verbeek, 2011). Artefacts likewise function as political objects, guiding attention, structuring participation, and enabling or restricting interpretations.

Recognising design as political framing helps explain why designers frequently engage in sensitive negotiations around legitimacy, value, and ownership. Their interpretive labour can challenge entrenched logics or power structures, making framing an inherently political act that operates through persuasion, facilitation, and ethical sensitivity rather than formal authority.

## **2.5 Designers as informal leaders**

Integrating the preceding perspectives, designers can be understood as informal leaders who exert influence through relational, interpretive, and facilitative work. Their boundary-spanning position allows them to mediate between user needs, technical constraints, and organisational priorities. Rather than relying on authority, designers contribute by enabling others to make sense of complexity, negotiate trade-offs, and align around shared understandings.

Designers enact leadership when they build credibility and trust, create artefacts that support shared interpretation, facilitate cross-functional dialogue, and frame issues in ways that reveal constraints or opportunities. Their ethical commitment to user well-being and system-level impact further strengthens the legitimacy of their influence. In contexts characterised by ambiguity, interdependence, and conflicting priorities, these capacities become essential for coordinated action. Recent work has similarly highlighted designers' potential to influence policy, governance and socio-technical systems, and argued that such influence carries significant ethical responsibility (Norman, 2023; Monteiro, 2019).

Design work is not only creative but organisational: it shapes meaning, structures collaboration, and guides decision-making. Scholars of design leadership highlight that designers contribute to organisational change by reframing problems, enabling participation, and cultivating reflective learning (Junginger, 2015; Kimbell, 2011; Sangiorgi, 2011). Designers therefore exemplify forms of leadership that are distributed, relational, and enacted through the material and discursive practices of design itself. These strategic and sociotechnical insights converge in the figure of the designer, whose work spans boundaries and enables collective sensemaking.

## **2.6 Summary of theoretical framework**

This chapter has outlined the relational, organisational, and sociotechnical foundations that shape informal influence in design work. Leadership is enacted through interaction and shared meaning rather than through hierarchy; power is relational, symbolic, and sustained by credibility and trust; organisational maturity structures opportunities for participation; and strategic design positions framing, facilitation, and artefact creation as key mechanisms of collective sensemaking.

Together, these perspectives provide a coherent theoretical basis for examining how designers influence decision-making without formal authority and how they participate in shaping organisational direction through interpretive and relational practices. Having established the conceptual basis for examining informal design leadership, the next chapter describes how these ideas were operationalised through the research design and data analysis.

## **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This chapter describes the qualitative research design used to examine how UX and service designers influence decision-making without formal authority. The methodological choices reflect the exploratory nature of the research problem and the study's aim to understand designers' everyday practices, interpretations and contextual constraints within real organisational settings.

### **3.1 Research strategy and approach**

The study adopts an abductive, qualitative case-study strategy, which allows iterative movement between theory and data. Abduction is appropriate when existing theories provide partial explanations and empirical insights are needed to refine or extend them. Informal design leadership, particularly its relational, interpretive and context-dependent aspects, is a phenomenon that cannot be meaningfully captured through purely deductive or purely inductive logic.

The case-study approach does not refer to a single organisation but to a multi-case configuration: each interview participant represents a case embedded in their organisational environment. This enables comparison across contexts that vary in terms of design maturity, sectoral logic and team structures. The objective is not to generalise statistically but to produce analytical generalisations that illuminate mechanisms of influence across cases with shared professional characteristics.

### **3.2 Research methods**

Data were collected through six semi-structured interviews with experienced UX and service designers. Semi-structured interviewing enabled participants to describe concrete experiences of influencing, negotiating boundaries and collaborating in cross-functional environments, while allowing the researcher to probe deeper into emerging topics.

Interviews are particularly suitable for studying informal leadership, as influence without authority is often enacted in fleeting moments, relational micro-interactions and tacit negotiation processes that are not documented in formal artefacts.

Interviews thus provide access to designers' reasoning, interpretations and retrospective sensemaking, components essential for understanding how informal leadership is performed in practice.

Prior to the main data collection, the semi-structured interview guide was pilot tested with a participant outside the final sample. The pilot phase led to several meaningful revisions: redundant demographic questions were removed, additional probes focusing on trust, strategic framing, and role negotiation were included, and the overall question order was refined to improve narrative flow. These adjustments enhanced the clarity of the interviews and ensured a stronger alignment with the theoretical framework.

### **3.3 Participant sampling and selection criteria**

The study used purposive sampling, selecting participants based on their ability to inform the research questions rather than on representativeness. Given the focus on informal leadership in design, the sample intentionally included formally trained UX/service designers, with 4–8 years of experience (mid-level to senior), working in distinct organisational environments, operating with varying degrees of design maturity, and regularly collaborating in cross-functional teams.

These criteria ensured that each participant had sufficient exposure to situations in which informal influence becomes relevant, e.g., negotiation with product owners, facilitating workshops, mediating between technical and business perspectives, or advocating for design in low-maturity settings.

Six participants are appropriate for an in-depth qualitative study for three reasons:

1. **Depth over breadth:** Semi-structured interviews focusing on detailed work practices generate rich data; analysing more cases would weaken the depth of analysis.
2. **Thematic saturation:** Themes began to stabilise after five interviews; the sixth added nuance but did not introduce new conceptual categories, suggesting saturation was reached.
3. **Cross-case variation:** The sample includes designers from internal teams, consultancies, public-sector contexts and hybrid environments, providing adequate variation to examine contextual enablers and constraints.

Participants were purposively selected to represent a variety of organisational contexts, levels of design maturity, and degrees of strategic responsibility. An overview of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Participant ID	Current Role / Title	Years of Design Experience	Organisational Type	Summary of Context and Focus
H1	UX Designer / Consultant	5	IT consultancy	Member of a multi-firm design team providing UX consulting to client projects; advocates for design visibility and strategic inclusion across projects.
H2	Service Designer / Team Lead	4	Private-sector organisation	Leads a small design project team; operated in an environment with low design maturity and limited executive support.
H3	Freelance / Design Lead	8	Independent / project-based	Works as a coordinating designer and informal team lead in digital and cultural projects; strong background in visual design and communication.
H4	Internal UX Designer	6	Insurance company	Works in internal systems UX; focuses on improving complex legacy systems and communication between teams.
H5	Product Designer / Consultant	5	IT consultancy (banking sector client)	Operates as an embedded designer in a large multidisciplinary client team; balances tactical delivery and strategic design advocacy.
H6	Product & Service Designer / Consultant	4	IT and digital services company	Focused on early-stage service definition and strategic facilitation; participates in high-level client strategy discussions.

**Table 1 Interview participant profiles**

Although the sample includes designers from different organisational settings, it is important to acknowledge that consultants are somewhat overrepresented. Consultants often operate across multiple client organisations and navigate diverse governance, cultural, and maturity contexts, which provides rich variation in experiences but may also shape how influence is enacted and perceived. Their work typically demands heightened relational awareness, expectation management, and rapid trust-building compared to fully internal designers. As a result, the findings may slightly accentuate practices associated with boundary navigation, facilitation, and persuasive framing. This does not invalidate the insights but highlights that they may be more pronounced in consultancy-heavy environments than in highly embedded, long-tenure internal design roles.

### 3.4 Interviews and participant overview

The empirical material was collected through semi-structured thematic interviews with six professional UX and service designers. The purpose of the interviews

was to examine how designers influenced organisational decision-making without formal authority, and to identify the organisational, relational, and methodological factors shaping that influence.

The interview themes were derived from the theoretical framework and covered the following areas:

1. the participant's role and organisational context,
2. influence mechanisms,
3. enablers and barriers,
4. the use of design methods, and
5. approaches to demonstrating impact.

The interview process comprised several stages. Following an initial desk test of the draft questions to ensure thematic coherence, the guide was refined and validated through the pilot phase. The main study interviews were then conducted remotely via secure online platforms. Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes, and all participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Notes were taken during the discussions, and all interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymised. Identifying information was removed, and each participant was assigned a pseudonym (H1–H6) before analysis.

The interviews began with background questions about the participants' professional roles, career paths, and organisational settings. This was followed by in-depth discussion of concrete examples of influencing without authority, the use of methods and tools, contextual enablers and constraints, and strategies for communicating the value of design work. The interview questions, in Finnish, are provided in Appendix A and English in Appendix B.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

The qualitative data analysis followed a three-stage grounded theory procedure (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014). During open coding, 676 meaning units (e.g., Facilitation, risk framing, evidence, co-creation) were identified across six interview transcripts. These were condensed into 28 initial codes, which were

subsequently organised into six axial categories (e.g., credibility, facilitation, advocacy). Finally, selective coding integrated these categories into the overarching theme of *trust-based sensemaking*. Examples illustrating each phase of the coding process are provided in Appendix C, demonstrating the transparency and traceability of the analytical approach.

The interpretive synthesis was complemented by sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1954). After the initial coding cycle, the data were re-examined considering the extended theoretical framework, particularly sensemaking leadership and cultural power distance. These constructs were not applied as coding categories but as interpretive lenses used to test whether emerging patterns aligned with, contradicted, or nuanced theoretical expectations.

The use of cultural power distance requires a methodological clarification. The study does not claim to perform cross-cultural comparison, nor were participants selected to represent any specific cultural or governance type. The concept functions solely as a contextual lens that helps interpret how organisational norms and expectations shape informal leadership practices. Its use does not extend the methodological scope beyond what the empirical design supports.

After applying these sensitising concepts, all coded material was re-examined to ensure that no categories had been retrofitted to theory and that the patterns remained grounded in participants' accounts. This iterative abductive process strengthened the internal coherence of the analysis while preserving empirical fidelity.

### **3.5.1 Persona analysis and synthesis**

Persona synthesis was used as an analytical integration technique, not as a user-facing design artefact. The choice of personas requires justification because it differs from typical qualitative representations (e.g., typologies, profiles, narrative vignettes). The method is legitimate for three reasons:

This analytic use of personas aligns with established methodological treatments of personas as integrative models for representing cross-case patterns (Cooper, 1999; Pruitt & Grudin, 2003), where the goal is not to depict individual participants

but to synthesise recurring behaviours and orientations into coherent archetypes that support interpretation.

The study examines how designers enact informal leadership. Personas allow the researcher to synthesise recurring behavioural patterns, modes of influence, values and ethical orientations, strategies used across contexts. Unlike typologies, personas foreground the embodied, role-based nature of influence, which fits relational leadership theories.

Each persona is constructed from multiple participants' coded statements, representing a composite of shared practices rather than single individuals. This makes them effective for integrating complex relational behaviours, highlighting contrasts between influence modes, and illustrating how contextual conditions shape those modes.

Rooted in literature on boundary objects (Star & Griesemer, 1989), personas provide an interpretive tool that, communicates findings clearly, supports theoretical integration, and enables readers to understand how informal leadership manifests across varying contexts. Thus, personas are treated as researcher-generated analytical models, comparable to leadership archetypes used in management research.

To avoid the risk that personas appear “too neat” or detached from data, the analysis followed these safeguards:

- Each persona maps directly to specific axial categories.
- Verbatim quotations from multiple participants ground each persona.
- Persona attributes were cross-checked against raw data to prevent over-fitting.
- The six personas correspond to different transitions within the trust-based sense-making cycle.

This methodological transparency strengthens internal validity and gives examiners confidence that personas reflect genuine patterns rather than researcher fabrication.

### **3.6 Reliability and ethics of research**

The reliability of the study was supported through systematic methodological practices. The analysis followed a transparent coding procedure, and interpretations were consistently anchored in examples drawn from the data. Reliability was also reinforced by documenting analytic decisions throughout the coding and theme-development stages.

Ethically, the study complied with the principles of responsible conduct of research. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before each interview. The data were anonymised during transcription, and all identifying information was removed to ensure confidentiality. Research materials were stored securely and retained only for the duration of the study. Personal identifiers such as age and gender were omitted to protect anonymity.

Because some interview discussions involved sensitive professional experiences, such as gender bias and instances of perceived misogyny in workplace contexts, care was taken to maintain psychological safety during the interviews. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw at any stage without consequence. All transcripts were treated confidentially, and potentially identifiable contextual details were paraphrased or omitted in the final report to avoid risk of recognition.

Put together, the combination of semi-structured interviews, inductive coding, and iterative abductive interpretation provides a robust foundation for examining how designers experience and enact informal leadership within their organisational settings. With the methodological approach established, the following chapter presents the empirical findings that emerged from this analysis.

## 4. RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings of the empirical study based on six semi-structured interviews with UX and service designers (H1–H6). The analysis followed an inductive thematic approach, where open coding and category grouping were used to identify recurring patterns and differences across participants. The results are structured around key themes that emerged from the data, each describing how designers experience and enact informal leadership in their organisational contexts.

To maintain transparency, each quotation is marked with an interview ID (e.g., H3). Quotations are used to illustrate the core findings and to show variation in viewpoints rather than statistical generalisation. This chapter focuses on describing what was said and observed in the data. Interpretations in relation to previous research and theory are presented later in the Discussion.

### 4.1 Overview of interview themes and emerging insights

The semi-structured interviews generated rich empirical material describing how designers influence decision-making in everyday organisational settings. While the interview guide covered six broad thematic areas derived from the theoretical framework, participants' accounts expanded beyond these prompts, revealing overlapping patterns of collaboration, negotiation, and reflection. The themes therefore functioned as entry points that surfaced the lived mechanisms of informal leadership rather than strict analytic categories. The following excerpts, organised according to the main interview topics, are paraphrased in English based on the interview notes.

Discussions about *roles and contexts* revealed substantial variation in how design work is positioned across organisations, from internal product teams to consultancy and freelance environments. Participants described both embedded and peripheral positions:

- "I'm a UX consultant working across several companies, you have to work constantly to stay visible." (H1)

- “Internal systems UX at insurance company. Lot of negotiation with devs and POs.” (H4)

These contrasts highlighted how organisational maturity and proximity to decision-making define the available space for influence.

When reflecting on *episodes of informal leadership*, participants recounted initiating coordination in moments of ambiguity and taking responsibility when no one else did.

- “I knew someone who had a clear problem that design could help, so I just took it on myself.” (H2)
- “I started calling myself the head of design and went to present to the board.” (H3)

Such stories illustrated how facilitation and initiative replaced authority as triggers for leadership action.

Accounts of *strategies and influence methods* emphasised credibility, persistence and rhetorical adaptability. Designers described relying on evidence, prototypes and timing rather than persuasion alone:

- “I’ve grown fond of data-driven design. Saying ‘Users said so’ isn’t enough.” (H1)
- “If people want skip proper research, I run through risk scenarios of what could happen, to get people to listen.” (H2)

These examples showed how analytical framing and contextual reading of situations often proved more effective than formal authority.

The theme of networks and trust illuminated the social infrastructure of influence. Designers portrayed trust as the practical currency of impact:

- “I look for allies early, especially among the developers.” (H3)
- “Trust is the currency of influence.” (H4)
- “Trust grew when experienced colleagues led by example.” (H5)

Through continuous collaboration and empathy, designers converted relational capital into organisational leverage.

When discussing *role boundaries and legitimacy*, participants described oscillating between central and peripheral positions, sometimes welcomed as integrators, sometimes questioned for overstepping.

- “Sometimes I feel I’m in situations where I wasn’t expected, but that’s exactly when insights happen.” (H5)
- “I choose my battles and sometimes leave the situation, to avoid unnecessary ones.” (H3)

Such reflections showed how ambiguity both enables and tests influence, making negotiation an everyday leadership practice.

The variation in these accounts also reflected differences in design maturity across organisational contexts. Designers embedded in high-maturity settings, such as internal consultancies or long-standing design teams, described more structured collaboration and clearer expectations for their role, whereas those in low-maturity or newly formed contexts had to build credibility and trust case by case. This pattern supports the earlier theoretical view that organisational design maturity shapes the conditions under which informal leadership can develop.

Finally, in reflections and development, designers spoke about sustaining influence through ethical consistency, selective engagement and continuous learning:

- “At least I’m there, so I can try to reduce the harm.” (H4)
- “As a young woman, I had to bring data and feasibility studies to counter arguments.” (H6)
- “With facilitation you make sure every role has space, it gets you further than arguing.” (H4)

These remarks revealed how integrity and reflection help maintain long-term credibility under uncertainty.

Beyond individual accounts, the material also reflected the diversity of organisational settings in which the participants operated. Most interviewees worked as consultants in IT or digital services companies embedded in client organisations (H1, H2, H5, H6), one held an internal UX role in a large insurance company (H4), and one combined freelance work with roles in a cultural NGO and earlier experience in agencies and IT companies (H3). Some of these client contexts were

clearly private-sector and commercially driven, while others were public or civic. Rather than allowing systematic comparison between sectors, this variety illustrates that the same informal leadership patterns recur across consultancy, internal product teams, and civic/public projects.

Together, these thematic discussions portray informal leadership as a relational and adaptive practice embedded in the everyday realities of design work. They also suggest that organisational form (consultancy vs internal role), design maturity and perceived hierarchy modulate how easily such leadership can be exercised, even when the underlying influence mechanisms remain similar. The next section summarises how these insights were systematically coded and integrated into six higher-level analytic themes that together constitute the model of trust-based sensemaking.

## **4.2 From coding to core perspectives**

The interview material was analysed through iterative coding that moved from open to axial and finally to selective categories, following the grounded-theory principles described in Chapter 3. Altogether 676 meaning units were identified across the six interviews. These were condensed into 28 initial codes, grouped into six axial categories and eventually integrated into six selective perspectives (see Appendix C for the axial and selective coding trail).

During selective coding, theoretical constructs identified earlier in the literature review, particularly sensemaking and sense-giving leadership, cultural power distance, and sectoral governance logics, were treated as sensitizing concepts rather than predefined categories. They did not determine how data were coded, but they helped contextualise why similar mechanisms of informal leadership appeared in somewhat different guises across consultancy work, internal corporate roles, and civic or public-facing projects. For example, accounts from highly developer-centric environments foregrounded negotiation of access and credibility, whereas narratives from longer-term public and education-sector collaborations emphasised patient coalition-building and the use of evidence over time to gain trust. These concepts helped organise contextual variation in how informal leadership behaviours appeared across different work settings.

While the earlier section described what designers said, this section summarises how these statements were grouped analytically. The resulting perspectives capture the main mechanisms through which designers exercise informal leadership and sustain influence in organisational settings. Each perspective represents a distinct pattern of reasoning and practice, but all are connected by the cyclical logic of credibility, trust, facilitation and reflection.

1. **Credibility and professional legitimacy:** Participants consistently described influence as beginning with demonstrable competence. Designers gain entry to decision-making by showing analytical rigour, producing evidence, and connecting design outputs to business or strategic outcomes. Legitimacy is constructed through visibility and repeated delivery rather than role authority.
2. **Relational trust and psychological safety:** Trust operates as the practical currency of leadership. Designers build influence by creating safe environments for dialogue, aligning interests, and maintaining reliability in cross-functional collaboration. Trust enables openness to design reasoning and experimentation.
3. **Facilitation and co-creation:** Leadership is enacted through participation. Designers convene diverse stakeholders, make implicit assumptions visible, and guide teams toward shared understanding using visual and experiential artefacts. Facilitation replaces command with coordination.
4. **Framing and translation:** Designers act as translators between user, technical and business logics. By reframing problems and choosing language that resonates with different audiences, they turn design insight into organisational action. Effective framing connects empathy with strategy.
5. **Alignment and organisational learning:** Participants described how influence tended to continue when design practices became embedded in collective routines. Designers promote feedback loops, retrospectives and evidence-based reflection that link operational activity with strategic sensemaking and several interviewees characterised design activities as supporting team learning over time.
6. **Ethical and reflexive resilience:** Sustaining influence requires moral clarity and self-awareness. Designers described regulating their engagement, maintaining ethical consistency and protecting boundaries to prevent burnout. Reflection on personal values and system constraints anchors leadership in integrity.

These perspectives describe the recurring mechanisms through which designers exercised influence. of informal leadership as a relational, iterative process rather

than a position or title. Competence made visible through outcomes becomes credibility, credibility supports trust, trust enables facilitation and shared understanding, and repeated cycles of framing and collaboration lead to alignment and organisational learning, with reflection renewing the loop. This competence–credibility–trust–understanding–alignment cycle is visualised in Figure 1 and provides the organising model for the analysis that follows, which presents each perspective in detail, supported by participant quotations that illustrate how these mechanisms manifest across different organisational contexts.

While the six core perspectives summarise the outcomes of coding, the analysis also revealed that informal leadership is simultaneously discursive (enacted in language), relational (sustained through trust networks), and interpretive (stabilised through framing).

#### **4.2.1 Credibility and Professional Legitimacy**

Across all interviews, participants emphasised that influence without formal authority begins with credibility. Designers described that their ability to shape decisions depended on how convincingly they could demonstrate analytical depth, strategic awareness, and the relevance of design outcomes to organisational goals. Rather than relying on title or hierarchy, legitimacy was built through consistent performance, visible results, and evidence-based reasoning.

Several participants noted that showing tangible proof of design value was often more persuasive than argument alone. One consultant (H1) explained that they had “grown fond of data-driven design” because simply saying ‘users said so’ no longer convinced decision-makers. Another participant (H6) described how even low-fidelity prototypes could secure approval rapidly, “sometimes within a single workshop”, because they made potential solutions concrete. These examples illustrate how data and artefacts served as visible demonstrations of competence, turning abstract recommendations into actionable proposals. In more heavily regulated or high-stakes contexts such as banking, insurance, and national public-board, participants (H4, H5, H6) described an even stronger need to combine user evidence with risk framing and feasibility arguments to establish credibility, reflecting the tighter governance and accountability constraints in these domains.

Others linked credibility to the ability to translate between business, technical, and design languages. A product designer (H5) said that presenting findings “in business terms, cost, risk, and customer retention, makes the argument land,” noting that without this alignment “design stays decorative.” Similarly, the freelance designer (H3) stressed that understanding the developer’s logic was essential: “It’s not enough to be right about users if you can’t show feasibility.” Fluency in multiple organisational vocabularies increased designers’ perceived authority and allowed them to bridge the divide between creative and technical reasoning.

Visibility also emerged as a recurring theme. Several participants described the need to “show up” in conversations where design was not automatically represented. A consultant (H1) noted that “you have to work constantly to stay visible; if you don’t, someone else defines the outcome,” while another participant (H3) recounted how they “started calling myself the head of design and went to present to the board” to secure design’s seat at the table. These accounts portray credibility as proactive rather than bestowed. Something maintained through presence and initiative rather than position.

At the same time, credibility was recognised as a relational quality that develops over time through reliability, transparency, and follow-through. One designer (H2) observed that “if you’re open about what you don’t know, people start trusting what you do know,” emphasising that humility and honesty strengthened trust rather than undermined authority. Participants agreed that delivering on commitments, sharing progress openly, and acknowledging uncertainty were central to building long-term legitimacy.

Taken together, these accounts portray credibility as the gateway to informal leadership. Demonstrating competence, translating insight into organisational language, and maintaining visibility established the foundation for the trust and collaboration explored in the following section. Influence, in this sense, was earned incrementally through consistent contribution rather than granted by formal power.

### 4.2.2 Relational trust and psychological safety

If credibility opened the door to influence, trust was what allowed designers to walk through it. Participants repeatedly described trust as the practical currency of influence, emphasising that persuasion alone rarely sufficed without established personal reliability and mutual respect. Influence was not a matter of asserting expertise but of cultivating environments where colleagues felt safe to collaborate, question assumptions, and share unfinished ideas.

Designers characterised trust as something built incrementally through consistent interaction rather than declared once and for all. H1 reflected that being “in contact with people constantly helps you get your voice heard,” noting that trust accumulates through day-to-day collaboration rather than formal meetings. H3 explained that they always “look for allies early, especially among the developers,” because early alignment prevented later resistance and created a foundation of reciprocity. Building these micro-level connections made influence durable even in unstable organisational structures.

Several interviewees described trust not as a soft interpersonal quality but as a precondition for psychological safety, the collective confidence that speaking up or experimenting would not carry personal risk. H4, A designer working in an internal team, summarised this ethos succinctly: “Trust is the currency of influence.” Their comment captured a widely shared sentiment that, without psychological safety, design work easily became defensive or tokenistic. Where team members trusted each other, even controversial insights or research findings could be discussed constructively.

Participants also noted that maintaining trust required sensitivity to power dynamics and communication style. H4 said that they “try to make sure it’s not just the loudest voices that get heard,” describing how facilitation and turn-taking practices allowed quieter contributors to participate equally. H2 observed that acknowledging others’ expertise, especially in engineering and business domains, helped avoid the perception that design was trying to “own” decisions. Trust, in this sense, was maintained by distributing credit and fostering shared ownership of outcomes.

For consultants and freelancers, relational trust extended beyond internal teams to include clients. H5 explained that “trust grew when experienced colleagues led by example,” recalling how senior designers’ openness to critique modelled vulnerability and professionalism for others. Others found that sustaining trust across organisational boundaries required visible reliability: being available, following through, and communicating early about potential issues. These relational habits built a professional reputation that substituted for formal authority.

Trust-building was also shaped by organisational structure. In highly developer-centric or layered settings, where communication with decision-makers flowed through intermediaries such as product owners or distant leadership (e.g., H3, H5, H6), designers described having to invest more in informal relationships, sponsors, and in-betweeners agents to keep design concerns visible. In flatter teams or where design had an established presence, trust developed more directly through day-to-day collaboration and shared delivery.

A recurring observation was that trust was slow to build yet fragile to lose. Participants described moments when shortcuts, rushed decisions, or unacknowledged mistakes undermined their credibility and limited future influence. Re-establishing trust demanded transparency and time. As several participants noted, people tend to trust you “once they’ve seen you handle a difficult situation without blaming others” (H2, H4). Trust, therefore, emerged as a product of character as much as competence.

Across the interviews, designers agreed that trust was the bridge between individual expertise and collective decision-making. It allowed teams to engage in candid discussion, tolerate uncertainty, and co-create solutions that none could have reached alone. Whereas credibility legitimised participation, trust transformed it into collaboration. The next section explores how designers operationalised this trust in practice, by using facilitation and co-creation to make shared understanding tangible. Several interviewees noted that trust built in one project carried forward to the next, enabling earlier facilitation and smoother reframing the second time around.

### 4.2.3 Facilitation and Co-creation

Once credibility and trust were established, designers enacted leadership most visibly through facilitation. Participants described facilitation not merely as organising meetings or workshops but as the everyday practice of making assumptions explicit, aligning perspectives, and creating shared ownership of problems. Through facilitation, designers translated interpersonal trust into collective movement and decision-making.

Several interviewees characterised facilitation as a process of *making the invisible visible*. H1 explained that workshops often revealed “hidden assumptions that no one realised were driving the conversation.” By visualising these differences through mapping or quick sketches, discussions shifted from defending opinions to exploring evidence. H6 recalled using rapid prototyping as ‘a sandbox that everyone could gather around,’ and another participant (H5) noted that turning a disputed concept into a visual flow ‘changed the discussion completely: people started negotiating with the diagram instead of each other.’ These examples emphasise how artefacts made ideas concrete and reduced the anxiety of abstract debate.

Designers explicitly described facilitation as “making people see the same picture” or providing a “sandbox everyone can gather around” (e.g., H1, H5, H6). In these accounts, workshops, maps and prototypes operated as sensemaking devices: they helped participants interpret ambiguous situations, surface underlying assumptions and negotiate a shared understanding of what was at stake. In this sense, facilitation functioned as informal sense-giving: designers shaped how others understood problems and possibilities without relying on formal authority.

Facilitation was also described as a means of democratising participation. An internal H4 said they “try to make sure different roles have equal space,” because decision quality improved when engineers, managers, and designers contributed on equal footing. Others used similar language of inclusion: facilitation was a way to balance authority, encourage listening, and ensure that “it’s not just the loudest voice that gets heard.” (H4)

Several participants emphasised the emotional labour of facilitation. H2 explained that “you have to read the room constantly, sense when people are ready to decide and when they just need to vent.” H3 noted that designers often ended up mediating conflicts that were “technically outside our scope” because no one else had the neutral stance to do it. These descriptions portray facilitation as situational leadership: responding adaptively to group dynamics rather than directing from authority.

Artefacts, prototypes, storyboards, maps, emerged as essential facilitation tools. Designers used them to externalise thinking and move discussion from personal opinions to shared objects of reflection. H5 described turning a disputed concept into a visual flow, after which “people started negotiating with the diagram instead of each other.” This shift from abstract disagreement to tangible collaboration was repeatedly identified as a turning point in difficult projects.

Participants also recognised the limitations of facilitation. In low-maturity or high-pressure settings, workshops risked being dismissed as superficial if the outcomes were not anchored in subsequent action. As H1 summarised, “You earn the right to facilitate by what happens after the session.” Following through, documenting insights, turning them into stories or backlog items, was seen as essential for maintaining credibility and sustaining influence.

Overall, facilitation and co-creation functioned as the operational core of informal leadership. Through visualisation, structured dialogue, and emotional attunement, designers enabled others to see problems and possibilities in new ways. Facilitation translated the trust built in relationships into coordinated action, making collaboration both psychologically safe and pragmatically productive. The next section explores how designers extended this facilitative role further, through framing and translation, to connect local collaboration with organisational strategy.

#### **4.2.4 Framing and translation**

Designers consistently described their influence as hinging on how effectively they could *frame* problems and *translate* between different professional languages. Framing referred to defining what the issue was, why it mattered, and which perspectives needed to be included. Translation involved adapting the

same insight to the conceptual vocabulary of business, technology, and policy so that each audience could act on it. Through these intertwined activities, designers turned tacit understanding into shared direction.

Several participants described how reframing discussions changed both the tone and trajectory of decision-making. H2 explained that when research was about to be skipped, they “walked the team through a quick risk scenario of what could go wrong,” which immediately reopened the conversation. By re-casting research as risk mitigation rather than extra work, design gained managerial traction. H3 likewise noted that asking “simple, naive questions” often exposed hidden assumptions and helped colleagues recognise blind spots without confrontation. These subtle interventions showed how language could redirect attention without invoking formal authority.

Participants also emphasised the importance of matching their communication style to organisational logic. H2 and H5 both observed that analytical framing, linking design outcomes to cost, risk, and customer metrics, made senior leaders more receptive. H5 reflected that presenting findings “in business terms makes the argument land,” while H3 added that understanding technical feasibility was equally crucial: “It’s not enough to be right about users if you can’t show how, it will actually work.” The ability to move seamlessly between human-centred reasoning and operational priorities strengthened credibility and trust across domains.

Framing was not limited to persuasion; it also served as a cognitive tool for collective sensemaking. H4 described how facilitating joint discussions around user journeys or system maps helped “everyone sees the same picture,” allowing disagreements to surface as solvable differences in framing rather than personal conflicts. Visual frames, sketches, diagrams, prototypes, functioned as what several participants called “translation artefacts,” tangible representations that bridged vocabulary gaps between teams.

Timing emerged as another element of effective framing. H4 noted that “a good argument at the wrong time is still a bad argument,” underscoring how influence depends on reading the organisational moment, knowing when stakeholders are ready to reconsider priorities. Designers often described waiting for “windows of

receptiveness,” aligning their framing efforts with strategic planning cycles or leadership changes to maximise impact.

The interviews also hinted at how perceived hierarchy affected framing choices. In situations where senior leaders were distant, hard to access or explicitly preferred “strong”, directive experts (e.g., the expectation of a senior, technically oriented designer in H6’s account), participants described using evidence, scenarios and prototypes as indirect vehicles for challenging assumptions. In flatter or more relational cultures, designers more often relied on open questioning, joint risk-scenario discussions, and collaborative storytelling to reframe issues. These differences suggest that cultural expectations about authority and deference shape not whether designers can reframe, but how they do so.

Across interviews, framing and translation appeared as a sophisticated form of boundary-spanning work. Designers acted simultaneously as interpreters, storytellers, and diplomats, making abstract insights understandable and actionable for diverse audiences. Their influence stemmed from the capacity to reshape narratives so that users’ needs, technical feasibility, and business imperatives could coexist within a single story. In doing so, they transformed design from a specialist contribution into a shared language for decision-making.

#### **4.2.5 Alignment and organisational learning**

A recurring outcome of facilitation and framing was alignment, getting diverse actors to move in the same direction, and the gradual institutionalisation of that alignment through organisational learning. Participants described how design practices helped translate isolated insights into shared understanding and, over time, into new routines for decision-making. Alignment was not viewed as consensus for its own sake but as the ability to see interdependencies and coordinate decisions across disciplines.

H4 recalled that when a service map was presented during a cross-departmental meeting, “the business owner immediately changed the order of priorities.” Visualising the whole system reframed the discussion from defending individual features to negotiating strategic trade-offs. H6 described how retrospective sessions exposed bottlenecks in workload and “made the stress visible,” which led management to allocate additional design resources. In both cases, design artefacts

acted as mirrors for organisational dynamics, turning abstract tension into concrete data that could guide change.

The form that alignment took differed subtly across contexts. In highly regulated and legacy-heavy settings such as insurance, banking and national public-board (H4, H5, H6), alignment work often centred on making constraints, risks and process dependencies visible so that trade-offs could be navigated transparently. In more fluid or culturally oriented projects, such as those in creative or NGO environments (H3), alignment was described more in terms of narrative coherence and shared purpose, getting people to see “why it matters” and to commit to a common direction.

Several participants explained that genuine alignment required continuous feedback loops rather than one-off workshops. H5 noted that “when design is involved earlier, decisions become more transparent,” and described how early discovery phases prevented rework later in projects. H2 added that maintaining these loops also strengthened collective memory: “When people see evidence carried forward from one sprint to the next, they start trusting the process, not just the person.” Design thus became a medium for institutional learning. A way for organisations to remember what they had already discovered.

The interviews revealed that this form of learning was social as much as procedural. H4 emphasised that retrospectives and co-review sessions built psychological safety by providing space for reflection rather than blame. Others mentioned coaching to spread design thinking beyond the design team itself. H2 described “democratising design methods” so that product owners and developers could apply facilitation techniques independently. Over time, this diffusion of capability increased understanding of user-centred approaches and reduced reliance on individual champions.

Participants also recognised that alignment had to be maintained under pressure. Deadlines, leadership changes, or conflicting KPIs could quickly erode shared understanding. H3 reflected that “it’s easy for collaboration to collapse back into silos once the project gets tough,” underscoring the fragility of collective learning. Designers countered this by documenting decisions, visualising trade-offs, and reiterating the rationale behind choices, practices that kept memory alive when

attention shifted elsewhere. As these routines stabilised, teams began inviting designers in earlier by default, which further reinforced designers' credibility and renewed the conditions for trust.

Across cases, alignment and organisational learning represented the cumulative impact of informal leadership. By embedding reflective and visual practices into everyday work, designers created conditions for adaptive coordination. Their influence endured not through personal persuasion but through processes that out-lived individual contributions. When successful, design evolved from a facilitation event into an organisational habit: a routine of asking, showing, and learning together.

#### **4.2.6 Ethical and Reflexive Resilience**

The final theme concerns the personal and ethical foundation that sustains informal leadership over time. While credibility, trust, and facilitation enabled influence, participants also described the emotional and moral effort required to maintain it. Informal leaders often operated in ambiguous, politically charged environments where values, identity, and energy were constantly negotiated. Their ability to remain effective depended on ethical clarity, selective engagement, and reflection.

Several participants described navigating ethical tensions between professional principles and organisational constraints. H4 reflected, "At least I'm there, so I can try to reduce the harm," expressing a sense of responsibility to act as a buffer when decisions conflicted with user or societal values. H1 spoke of "compromises made for progress", deliberate small trade-offs intended to preserve influence for more important battles later. These comments reveal an awareness that integrity in design work is often situational: influence sometimes requires incremental rather than ideal outcomes.

Resilience also involved recognising and managing personal limits. H3 explained that "choosing battles and sometimes stepping away" was essential to preserve energy and avoid cynicism. The same participant described switching projects when persistent resistance made constructive influence impossible, noting that "you can't keep proving your value forever if the context won't let you." Others

echoed this pragmatic stance, describing self-protection as a precondition for sustained contribution rather than withdrawal from responsibility.

Gendered and hierarchical dynamics added another layer of complexity. H6 observed that “as a young woman, I had to bring data and feasibility studies to counter arguments,” describing how factual preparation served as both shield and amplifier for her voice. The need to over-demonstrate competence was experienced as both exhausting and empowering, a reminder that informal leadership remains entangled with broader cultural expectations of authority.

Ethical tensions also took different shapes across domains. In commercial and developer-centric projects, participants frequently described balancing user welfare against revenue, delivery pressure or technically driven priorities (e.g., “designing for the lowest common denominator,” concerns about tracking and AI-related misconceptions in H4, H5, H6). In civic and cultural work (H3’s activist projects), tensions were more closely tied to representation, inclusion and the risk of reinforcing existing marginalisations. In both cases, designers framed their role as trying to “reduce harm” from the inside while remaining alert to when the context no longer allowed meaningful influence.

Participants also emphasised reflection as a key mechanism of renewal. H4 noted that “facilitation works best when you also reflect on your own role in the tension,” suggesting that self-awareness helps prevent defensive behaviour. Others mentioned peer dialogue, journaling, or informal debriefs as ways to process emotional load and maintain perspective. Reflection, in this sense, functioned as a personal feedback loop that paralleled the organisational learning processes discussed earlier.

Taken together, these accounts portray ethical and reflexive resilience as the sustaining dimension of informal leadership. Designers exercised influence not only through what they did but through how they stayed: by maintaining integrity, recognising limits, and engaging deliberately with challenging systems. Their leadership rested on balancing advocacy with self-preservation and conviction with humility. Participants felt that reflective practices helped them sustain influence under changing conditions even in environments that offered little formal recognition or protection.

### **4.2.7 Summary of interview results**

The analysis of six interviews revealed that informal leadership among designers emerges through a cyclical process linking credibility, trust, facilitation, framing, alignment, and reflection. Each theme represents a distinct but interdependent mechanism through which influence develops and endures in the absence of formal authority. Together they describe informal leadership as trust-based sense-making: an ongoing social process that transforms individual expertise into collective understanding and coordinated action.

The first two themes, credibility and trust, form the enabling conditions. Designers earned credibility through consistent delivery, data-informed reasoning, and the ability to translate design outcomes into the language of business and technology. This professional legitimacy established the ground for relational trust, which functioned as the practical currency of influence. Trust was built through reliability, openness, and the creation of psychologically safe environments where collaboration could occur without fear of blame.

The next two themes, facilitation and framing, represent the primary activities through which designers enacted leadership. Facilitation converted trust into collective movement: by structuring dialogue, making assumptions visible, and balancing participation, designers transformed diverse viewpoints into shared ownership of problems. Framing extended this influence beyond the immediate team by linking user perspectives to organisational priorities, timing messages strategically, and translating insights across disciplinary boundaries.

The fifth theme, alignment and organisational learning, captured how these facilitative and framing practices accumulated into systemic impact. When visualisation, retrospectives, and documentation became regular habits, organisations began to internalise design-led reflection as part of their decision-making. Influence thus persisted not only through individuals but through the routines they helped establish, turning design into an infrastructure for adaptive learning.

Finally, ethical and reflexive resilience underpinned all other mechanisms. Participants demonstrated that sustaining influence required self-awareness, bound-

ary management, and moral clarity in complex or politicised environments. Reflection allowed designers to remain engaged without burnout and to act responsibly even when conditions were imperfect.

Although the core mechanisms of credibility, trust, facilitation, framing, learning and reflection appeared consistently across the six interviews, their expression was modulated by contextual conditions. Consultancy versus internal roles, developer-centric versus more design-aware organisations, the degree of hierarchy and distance to decision-makers, and the regulatory or civic character of the domain all influenced which strategies were available and how much effort was required to sustain influence. In this study, these contextual dimensions are not treated as comparative variables but as background conditions that help interpret why similar informal leadership practices sometimes felt easy and sometimes costly for participants.

Across interviews, participants described how influence renewed itself over time: successful collaboration increased visibility and credibility, which strengthened trust and opened new opportunities to facilitate and reframe subsequent projects. This pattern of reinforcement made leadership appear cyclical rather than step-wise, as each outcome created the conditions for the next. Influence then, followed a recurring pattern: conditions (credibility and trust) enabled mechanisms (facilitation, framing and translation), which led to outcomes (alignment and organisational learning)

Participants also described how results from one episode increased their visibility and credibility, which in turn strengthened trust and opened earlier involvement in the next project. One designer illustrated this dynamic through a series of low-fidelity prototypes that repeatedly resolved bottlenecks and impressed decision-makers. As these quick wins accumulated, a senior stakeholder began pulling the designer into discussions much earlier, and, as participant H6 noted, “the low-fidelity prototype was understood immediately, and it led to another six months of work,” a trajectory that subsequently drew them into strategic conversations as well. This iterative pattern suggested recurrence rather than a one-off sequence: each successful cycle of competence demonstrated, credibility recognised, trust earned, understanding built and alignment achieved fed the next, gradually shifting designers from late-stage add-ons toward earlier, more strategic involvement.

In the interviews, participants portrayed strategy not as a formal planning exercise but as an ongoing, collaborative process of framing and coordination. Designers saw their strategic contribution in the ability to connect user evidence to organisational priorities, translate insights into credible narratives, and time their interventions to moments when leadership attention was most receptive. Several described shifting vocabularies from “design” to “customer-centred business development” to make their input resonate in strategic discussions. This view aligns with the notion of strategic design introduced in Chapter 2.6: strategy enacted through framing, iteration, and shared sensemaking rather than through top-down control.

These accounts illustrate that designers’ framing practices are not only tools for local alignment but also acts of strategic sensemaking, through which they translate user-centred insight into organisational strategy and direction.

### **4.3 Personas and cross-person typological analysis**

Building on the persona synthesis method described in Chapter 3.4.1, this section translates the coded data into six composite personas that capture the variation and convergence in how designers enact informal leadership.

While the previous sections described recurring mechanisms of influence across the full data set, this section presents the findings at a more human-centred level. To capture the lived diversity of informal leadership practices, the interview data were synthesised into six designer-leader personas (P1–P6). Each persona represents a composite narrative that integrates professional background, influencing style, values, and contextual challenges. The approach builds on the persona method introduced in Chapter 3.4.1 and detailed in Appendix D, where persona synthesis was used as an interpretive technique to translate coded data (detailed in Appendix C) into tangible, narrative form.

Although several personas share behaviours such as collaboration, translation, and reflective inquiry, each represents a distinct mode of informal leadership. Facilitation in this context refers to structuring interaction, designing conversations, balancing participation, and enabling collective progress. Framing, in contrast, concerns the cognitive and interpretive work of defining what the issue is and how it should be understood. The personas are differentiated along these dimensions:

P1 emphasises relational cohesion, P2 ethical grounding, P3 narrative reframing, P4 systemic translation, P5 reflective inquiry, and P6 evidence-based materialisation. These distinctions clarify why multiple personas were needed to represent the variations of influence observed in the data.

While the personas are not mapped one-to-one onto specific organisations or sectors, elements of certain types were more pronounced in contexts. Traits associated with the Analytical Materialiser (P6), for instance, were especially visible in accounts from banking, insurance and public-board work, where evidencing feasibility, risk and impact was central (H4, H5, H6). Features of the Bold Storyteller and Facilitating Networker (P1, P3) were prominent in NGO and multi-project consultancy settings (H1, H3), where narrative persuasion, relationship-building and self-initiated access to decision makers were repeatedly described. These patterns illustrate how the same underlying leadership mechanisms recombine differently as designers move between organisational and sectoral contexts.

Personas make the findings more accessible by showing how different combinations of credibility, trust, facilitation, framing, and reflection appear in real professional identities. Instead of portraying “typical users,” they depict *designer-leaders*, professionals who lead without formal authority but through relational and interpretive work. Together, they highlight both convergence and variation in how influence manifests across organisational and career contexts.

While several personas share behaviours such as collaboration, translation and reflective inquiry, each represents a distinct mode of informal leadership. P1 emphasises relational cohesion and trust-building, P2 grounds influence in ethical reliability and psychological safety, P3 challenges assumptions through narrative reframing, P4 integrates perspectives across boundaries through translation and systems visualisation, P5 enables collective learning through questioning and reflective dialogue, and P6 influences through evidence, feasibility and materialised options. These distinctions clarify why multiple personas were needed and ensure that overlapping behaviours are understood as different emphases, not duplications.

ID	Persona label	Core influence mode	Distinctive strength	Typical risk or limitation
P1	Facilitating Networker	Builds trust and alignment through empathy and dialogue	Creates cohesion across teams and projects	Influence may remain invisible if facilitation is undervalued
P2	Ethical Facilitator	Leads through moral consistency and psychological safety	Strong ethical credibility; fosters inclusion	Frustration in low-trust or hierarchical settings
P3	Bold Storyteller	Challenges structures through narrative persuasion	Inspires action and cultural change	May provoke resistance in conservative environments
P4	Bridge Builder	Mediates between user, business, and technology domains	Integrates perspectives and reduces friction	Ongoing negotiation of boundaries can be draining
P5	Reflective Change Agent	Leads through questioning and collective sensemaking	Encourages learning and self-reflection	Role ambiguity and identity strain
P6	Analytical Materialiser	Demonstrates influence through data, prototypes, and evidence	Converts ideas into credible proof and action	Low visibility without advocacy or sponsorship

**Table 2 Leadership personas of participants**

Although these six personas differ in emphasis, from relational facilitation to analytical demonstration, they share a common foundation: influence built on trust, credibility, and interpretive action rather than positional power. Each persona illustrates a distinctive way of practising leadership-as-sensemaking in design work:

- P1: The *Facilitating Networker* cultivates trust and visibility across projects.
- P2: The *Ethical Facilitator* anchors influence in values and empathy.
- P3: The *Courageous Storyteller* reframes culture through narrative clarity.
- P4: The *Bridge Builder* translates between organisational logics.
- P5: The *Reflective Change Agent* enables dialogue and mutual learning.
- P6: The *Analytical Materialiser* legitimises design through data and tangible outcomes.

Together these personas demonstrate that informal leadership among designers is plural and adaptive. Influence may emerge through trust and facilitation, ethical conviction, storytelling, strategic translation, reflective inquiry, or evidence-based demonstration, often in combination within the same individual.

The next chapter builds on these empirical insights by examining how the findings relate to the theoretical perspectives outlined earlier and what they collectively suggest for understanding informal leadership in design.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This chapter interprets the findings of the study by relating them to the research questions and connecting them to contemporary theories of leadership, collaboration, and organisational learning. Its purpose is to explain how designers influence decision-making without formal authority and to illuminate how this influence unfolds through relational, material, and contextual mechanisms. The chapter begins by synthesising the empirical findings through the lens of the research questions, then extends this interpretation through the cyclical model of trust-based sensemaking, the persona orientations through which the cycle is enacted, and three cross-cutting mechanisms, identity work, artefact mediation, and adaptive problem-solving, that together clarify how designers lead in practice.

### 5.1 Interpreting the findings through the research questions

RQ1 asked how designers influence decision-making without formal authority, and the findings show that this influence emerges through relational work, in which designers demonstrate competence, translate this visibility into credibility and trust, facilitate collective framing, and help move groups toward alignment. These processes echo the core propositions of relational leadership theory, which argues that leadership emerges through ongoing social interactions where trust, credibility and shared meaning are co-constructed rather than imposed (Uhl-Bien, 2006) The patterns observed here also align with research on lateral leadership, which emphasises how influence in organisations flows through informal networks of expertise and trust, enabling individuals without positional authority to shape problem definitions and coordinate action (Cross & Parker, 2004). Designers' influence therefore reflects not only individual skill but the relational conditions through which leadership is enacted in practice. However, the extent to which these relational mechanisms can stabilise into influence, depends on the organisational context.

RQ1a examined the contextual factors that enable or constrain designers' influence, and the findings show how organisational conditions shape the consistency and reach of this relational cycle. High design maturity, psychological safety, and

low hierarchy created beneficial and stable trust networks, which provided more predictable access to strategic conversations. In contrast, low-maturity or highly hierarchical contexts required designers to repeatedly demonstrate value, rely more heavily on artefacts for persuasion, or navigate role boundaries carefully. Consultants faced the additional challenge of rebuilding credibility in each new client environment. These contextual patterns show how influence depends not only on designer practices but also on organisational readiness for collaborative inquiry.

RQ1b focused on the methods and behaviours that support designers' influence, and the findings reveal a repertoire centred on facilitation, visualisation and framing. Designers surfaced assumptions, balanced participation, reframed issues in systemic terms, and translated between professional languages, practices consistent with leadership-as-practice, which sees leadership as accomplished within situated interaction (Raelin, 2011). Artefacts functioned as boundary objects that allowed diverse stakeholders to negotiate meaning without direct confrontation (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Carlile, 2002).

RQ1c explored how these practices contribute to strategic alignment and organisational sensemaking, and the findings show that designers facilitate alignment through structured dialogue, visual synthesis and narrative reframing. Designers helped stakeholders recognise interdependencies, negotiate trade-offs, and connect operational decisions to broader intent. Over time, repeated cycles of reflection and evidence-based discussion supported organisational learning, echoing sensemaking processes in which shared interpretations emerge through enactment and reflection (Weick, 1995).

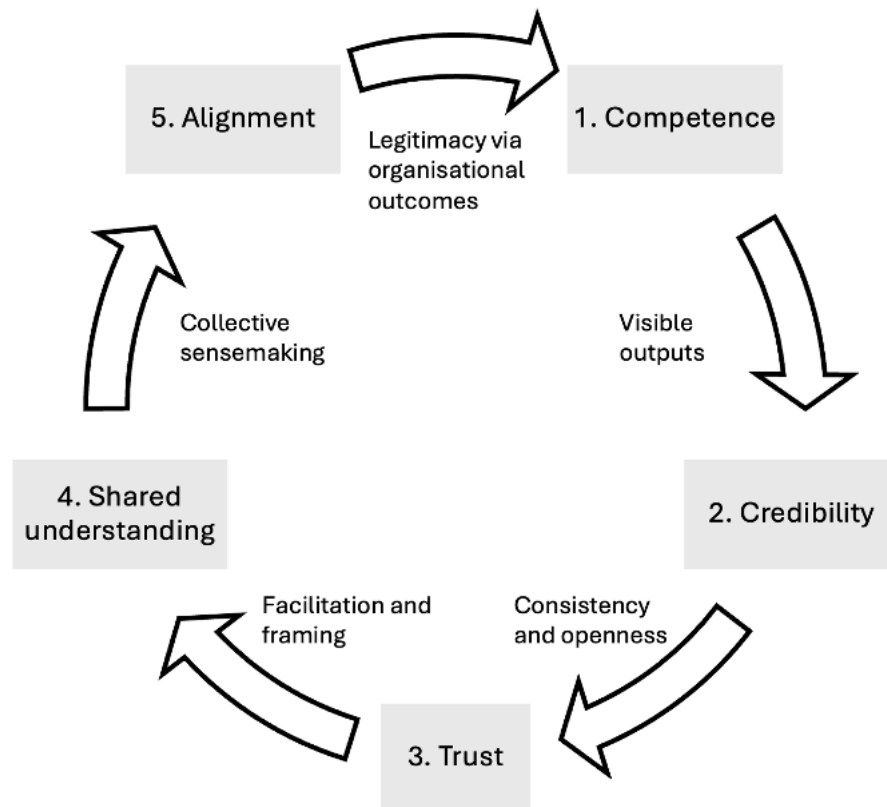
RQ2 explored how designers perceive strategy. To the participants it was not a formal planning activity, but an ongoing work of shaping attention, timing and interpretation. They contributed strategically by reframing issues, linking evidence to broader organisational concerns and enabling others to see connections they might otherwise overlook. This view resonates with emergent and sensemaking-based understandings of strategy (Whittington, 2019; Weick, 1995).

Collectively, the answers to all research questions provide the empirical grounding for the theoretical integration that follows, showing how informal leadership in design is enacted, conditioned and sustained.

## **5.2 The cyclical model of trust-based sensemaking**

The cyclical model that emerged from the analysis explains how informal influence develops and renews itself over time. Designers began by establishing competence through artefacts, analysis and synthesis, which provided the initial basis of credibility. As credibility accumulated, it was gradually converted into trust through consistent behaviour, openness and ethical steadiness. This dynamic reflects the core proposition of relational leadership theory, which positions trust and credibility not as personal traits but as relational currencies that enable coordination and shared action to emerge (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Once trust was in place, designers were able to facilitate dialogue, surface assumptions and structure interpretive work in ways that supported collective sensemaking. As shared understanding deepened, teams began to coalesce around common frames rather than rely on hierarchical directives. Over successive iterations, reflection and moral consistency renewed credibility, allowing the cycle to begin again.

Drawing these patterns together, the analysis produced a cyclical model of trust-based sensemaking. Figure 1 illustrates this model and shows how competence, credibility, trust, shared understanding and alignment are connected through visible outputs, consistency, facilitation and reflective renewal.



**Figure 1 Cyclical model of trust-based sensemaking**

The model resonates strongly with prior scholarship on leadership beyond formal authority. Its relational foundation mirrors research on lateral leadership, where influence emerges through reciprocal relationships and the ability to mobilise others through credibility and trust rather than positional power (Cross & Parker, 2004). The movement from trust to shared understanding also parallels leadership-as-practice perspectives, which conceptualise leadership as something enacted through situated activities such as structuring dialogue, mediating between professional languages and using artefacts to make complexity discussable (Raelin, 2011). These enactments illustrate how leadership becomes a distributed accomplishment rather than an attribute of a single individual.

The central role of prototypes, maps and diagrams in the cycle further echoes insights from boundary-object theory and research on material mediation. Bound-

ary objects provide just enough structure to be shared across professional domains while remaining flexible enough to support negotiation and reinterpretation (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Carlile, 2002; Nicolini, et al., 2012). Designers' use of such artefacts to externalise complexity and coordinate across boundaries demonstrates how material representations sustain both relational trust and cognitive alignment within the cycle.

Finally, the later stages of alignment and renewal connect the model to adaptive and ethical perspectives on leadership. Adaptive leadership emphasises mobilising learning rather than providing technical solutions (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002), and the designers' role in prompting reflection, reframing issues and supporting incremental adjustment closely mirrors this principle. Participants' emphasis on ethical steadiness and reflective practice also invokes transformational and moral leadership traditions, where legitimacy is sustained through consistency, authenticity and service to collective purpose (Burns, 1978; Bass & Avolio, 1994). These orientations help explain why trust renews over time and why informal influence can stabilise across cycles.

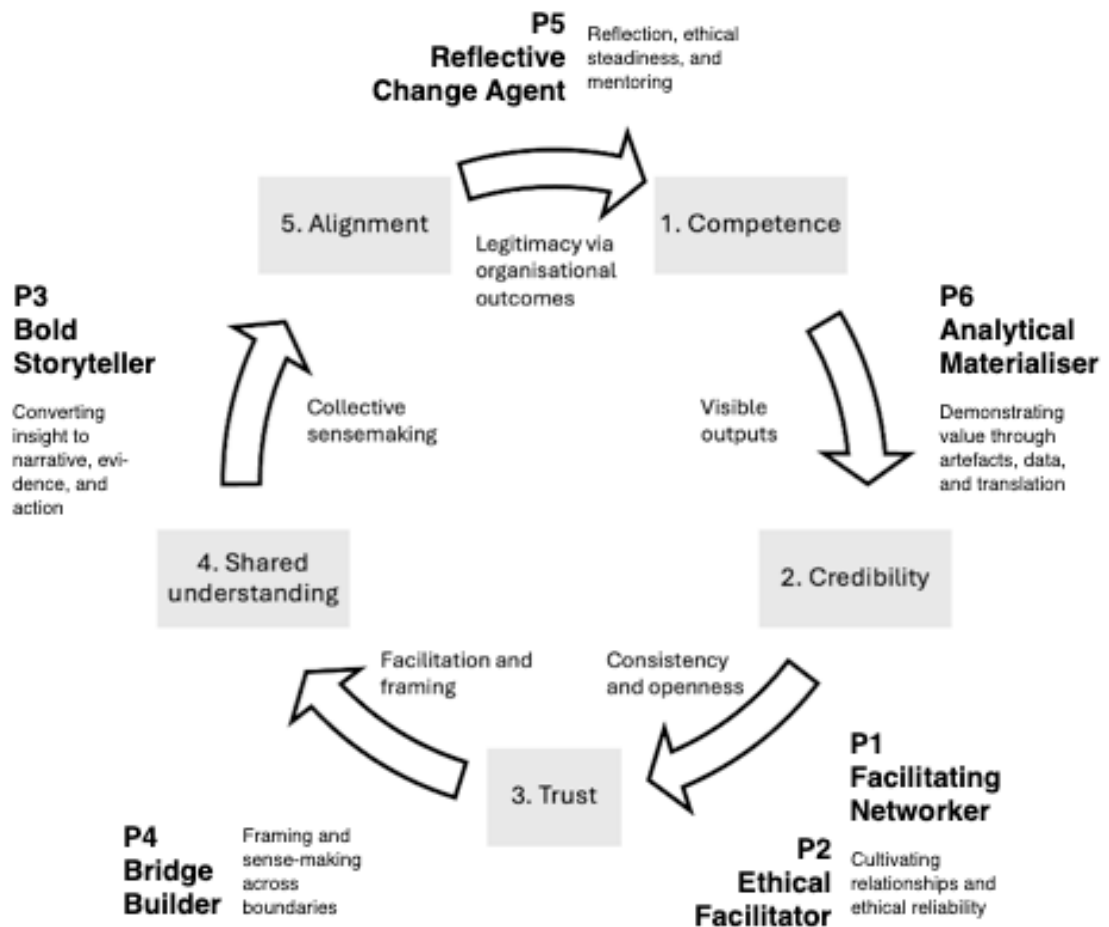
All these theoretical connections show that the cyclical model is not a departure from existing leadership theory but an integrative account of how relational, practice-based and adaptive mechanisms operate simultaneously within design work. It clarifies how influence without authority becomes possible when design practices establish relational trust, provide material anchors for shared interpretation and cultivate reflective, ethically grounded collaboration. The persona orientations that follow elaborate how designers emphasise different transitions within this cycle and thereby shape distinct patterns of influence in practice.

### **5.3 Personas as enactments of the cycle**

The persona orientations derived from the data illustrate how designers enact the cycle in practice. These personas capture patterned tendencies, combinations of behaviours, values and identity positions, rather than fixed types. From a theoretical standpoint, this view aligns with practice-based perspectives on leadership that emphasise leadership as accomplished through situated activities and interactions (Crevani, et al., 2010). Reading the personas through this lens helps ex-

plain why different designers accentuate different transitions in the cycle: leadership is not a property held by an individual but a set of practices that emerge in context, so actors will naturally specialise in those practices that suit their skills, roles and relationships.

Figure 2 positions the six designer-leader personas around the trust-based sensemaking cycle, highlighting the transitions where each orientation appears strongest in the empirical material and what leadership stance is implied.



**Figure 2** Personas mapped onto the trust-based sensemaking cycle.

At the same time, the persona distinctions resonate with design-specific accounts of leadership and organisational change. Junginger (2008) highlights how designers perform multiple organisational functions, facilitating dialogue, producing artefacts that reframe problems, and creating processes for collective reflection,

and shows that these different activities translate into distinct contributions to organisational learning. The personas in this study map onto that diversity: some enact the designer-as-analyst through rigorous synthesis and prototyping, others enact the designer-as-facilitator through workshop practice and boundary-spanning, and others enact the designer-as-steward through reflective coaching and ethical mediation. A more detailed visualisation of how the six personas distribute across facilitative–analytical and relational–structural influence modes is provided in the influence map in Appendix E.

These theoretical anchors make two claims plausible. First, they justify treating personas as orientations, relationally produced patterns of practice rather than static traits. Second, they explain why the same cyclical process (of competence, credibility, trust, shared understanding and alignment) can be enacted in multiple, complementary ways across individuals and contexts: different designers emphasise different practices because leadership-as-practice is distributed, and because design work itself contains a range of activities that map onto distinct leadership contributions.

These insights lead to the broader mechanisms that underpin informal design leadership, which cut across individual orientations and shape how influence takes form in practice.

#### **5.4 Cross-cutting mechanisms of influence**

A first mechanism concerns designers' dual identity as both operational contributors and adaptive change agents. Participants described continuously navigating between producing tangible outputs and facilitating reflective, system-oriented dialogue. This liminal position created leverage for influence but also vulnerability; legitimacy required ongoing demonstration of value and careful negotiation of expectations. These dynamics mirror research on boundary-spanning professionals (Bechky, 2003; Davies, et al., 2021) and adaptive leadership, where pacing and regulating disequilibrium are essential (Heifetz, 1994). Designers sustained influence through reflective practice, emotional regulation, and selective engagement.

A second mechanism concerns artefacts as boundary objects that mediate relationships and structure interpretation. Prototypes, diagrams and maps externalised complexity and enabled stakeholders to negotiate meaning without interpersonal confrontation. In practice, these artefacts allowed groups to “negotiate with the artefact instead of each other,” a dynamic that echoes Edmondson’s (1999) account of how shared structures can lower interpersonal risk and create the psychological safety needed for candid discussion. At the same time, artefacts functioned as repositories of organisational memory, preserving reasoning and decisions in ways consistent with Junginger’s (2008) argument that design outputs become instruments for organisational learning. Their role also carried a political dimension: choices about what to visualise, emphasise or omit shaped how issues were interpreted, reflecting Winner’s (1980) claim that artefacts embody political assumptions and Henderson’s (1999) observation that visual representations structure both collaboration and power in cross-functional work.

A third mechanism concerns adaptive problem-solving and systems thinking. Designers influenced decisions most effectively when they helped groups perceive patterns, interdependencies and underlying tensions that technical fixes alone could not resolve. This form of influence closely reflects Senge’s (1990) conception of systems thinking, where effective action depends on making visible the structures and mental models that shape behaviour. By helping teams shift from reacting to isolated issues toward recognising systemic causes, designers facilitated the kind of reflective inquiry and experimentation that Senge describes as foundational to organisational learning. However, this influence depended on organisational tolerance for ambiguity and learning; in contexts dominated by efficiency pressures or rigid hierarchy, the space required for such adaptive sense-making was significantly constrained.

Together, these mechanisms clarify how identity, artefacts and system-oriented reasoning reinforce the cycle of informal leadership. The following implications translate these insights into actionable recommendations.

## **5.5 Implications for practice, research and education**

For organisations, the findings underscore that facilitation, framing and translation are core leadership practices that support collective sensemaking. Treating

them as peripheral soft skills undervalues the mechanisms that enable distributed decision-making. Trust, psychological safety, and routines for reflection create conditions in which designers' influence can accumulate. This aligns with research showing how relational infrastructure supports learning and innovation (Edmondson, 1999; Schein, 2013).

For design leadership development, the findings suggest that design maturity is not merely a measure of process sophistication but a structural condition that shapes how trust, reflection and shared understanding take root in organisations. Research on design maturity shows that as organisations progress, they institutionalise practices that distribute trust, embed reflective habits and normalise evidence-based decision-making (Wrigley & Straker, 2015; Pernice, et al., 2024). Building on this insight, leadership programmes that incorporate design-led methods, such as framing, prototyping, visualisation and facilitation, can strengthen organisational learning systems and reduce reliance on individual advocacy. This interpretation is reinforced by broader industry studies showing that higher levels of design maturity correlate with enhanced innovation performance, stronger cross-functional collaboration and more coherent decision-making ecosystems (Design Council, 2021; McKinsey Design, 2018).

For individual designers, influence can be strengthened by cultivating organisational literacy, understanding political and temporal constraints, and maintaining reflective and ethical steadiness. Boundary management, peer support, and community engagement help sustain influence in contexts where recognition fluctuates.

The above implications rest on the interpretive and methodological choices of this study; the next section reflects on these boundaries and their effects on transferability.

## **5.6 Methodological reflections and boundaries of transferability**

As an insider researcher, my positionality enabled a depth of interpretation that would have been harder to achieve from an external standpoint, given my familiarity with design practice and organisational dynamics. At the same time, insider status carries the risk of blurring empirical insight with personal experience. This

required deliberate reflexivity of the kind described by Finlay (2002), who emphasises the need for researchers to surface assumptions and examine how their own perspectives shape the analytic process. To address this, I adopted the kind of systematic reflexive stance outlined by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009), using iterative writing, and cross-checking of interpretations to distinguish data-grounded patterns from prior professional intuition. These practices strengthened analytic transparency and reinforced the methodological integrity of the study.

Transferability is shaped by context. Finnish organisations tend to be low-power-distance with collaborative norms, which may accentuate relational and facilitative aspects of influence. The sample consisted of experienced designers, introducing an elite bias (Smith, 2006) and limiting generalisation to junior or narrowly scoped roles. Informal leadership through trust-based sensemaking is most applicable in relatively stable, mid-maturity settings where time for reflection exists. Highly volatile, hierarchical or efficiency-driven contexts may compress the temporal space needed for shared framing (Weick, 1993). These boundaries also resonate with critiques of collaborative governance that caution against overlooking structural power (Purdy, 2012).

Even with these methodological limits, the study suggests several promising directions for future research that can test and extend the model across contexts.

## **5.7 Directions for future research**

Future studies could examine how the cyclical model functions across cultures, sectors and levels of design maturity, illuminating how institutional norms shape the balance between facilitation and authority. Longitudinal research could explore how informal leadership stabilises or evolves as trust networks shift over time. Additional work is needed to understand how informal design leadership interacts with formal authority structures, particularly in hybrid leadership models that blend design-led facilitation with managerial decision rights.

As organisations increasingly integrate computational and AI-based tools, a further direction concerns how human and algorithmic systems jointly participate in sensemaking (Latto, et al., 2024; Weidmann, et al., 2025) and how leadership infrastructures evolve as socio-technical ecosystems (Manzini, 2015; Ghosh, 2024). These questions point beyond the scope of this thesis but underline its

central claim: that understanding design leadership as trust-based sensemaking offers a useful basis for analysing emerging forms of influence. The following concluding chapter summarises how the study contributes to this understanding and reflects on its limitations.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to understand how UX and service designers influence organisational decision-making without formal authority. The analysis shows that such influence arises not from hierarchical power but from a cyclical, relational process in which credibility, trust, facilitation, framing, alignment and ethical reflection reinforce one another over time. Designers enter consequential discussions by demonstrating competence through evidence, translation and analytical clarity. As colleagues begin to rely on this competence, trust develops, enabling designers to convene conversations, surface assumptions and construct shared understanding. Through framing and translation, they then connect user-centred insights to organisational priorities, shaping how problems are understood and what options appear viable. When these practices accumulate into routines, visualisation, retrospectives, knowledge sharing, they function as infrastructures for organisational learning, while ethical steadiness and reflective awareness renew the legitimacy of these practices and support the next iteration of influence.

The research also shows that contextual factors strongly modulate these dynamics. Influence was more readily exercised in organisations with higher design maturity, predictable communication structures and flatter hierarchies. In less mature or more rigid environments, designers depended more heavily on individual credibility, timing and personal networks to gain access to strategic dialogue. The methods that supported informal leadership, facilitation, artefact use, framing, translation and relational practice, proved effective across contexts but required more effort in settings where trust and cross-functional collaboration were not structurally supported.

Designers' accounts of strategy further clarified that they did not view strategy as a top-down plan but as an ongoing process of framing, coordination and reflective inquiry. Their strategic contribution lay in translating user and system insights into forms that could shape timing, priorities and shared direction. In this sense, designers perceived themselves not as decision-makers but as sense-makers: actors who help organisations recognise what matters, when it matters and how multiple perspectives can be woven into coherent action. Together, the research

questions converge on one insight: informal leadership in design is enacted through relational and interpretive work that transforms individual expertise into collective understanding and that aligns operational activity with systemic intent. It is leadership achieved through trust, not title, and through meaning-making rather than mandate.

Beyond answering the research questions, the study contributes an empirically grounded account of how informal leadership is enacted in design practice. The cyclical model of trust-based sensemaking and the complementary persona orientations show how designers lead through credibility, relational trust, facilitation, framing and reflective practice, and how these local episodes accumulate into patterns of influence that shape problem framing and decision-making. The integrated model bridges micro-level interactional mechanisms with meso-level organisational learning, while also providing a contextual understanding of how design maturity, organisational structure and cultural norms shape the viability of relational influence. Informal design leadership thus appears as a situated, systemic phenomenon rather than an individual trait.

Practically, the findings highlight several implications for organisations. Facilitation, framing and translation emerge as core leadership activities rather than peripheral “soft skills”. Creating conditions for informal leadership requires investing in psychological safety, transparent communication and shared design rituals that normalise reflection and inquiry. When design maturity is low, organisations may need to provide designers with explicit sponsorship or structured access to decision-making spaces to avoid over-reliance on personal advocacy and informal networks.

For designers themselves, the results underline the need to develop organisational literacy alongside craft expertise. Understanding timing, governance structures, political constraints and business logic enhances the credibility and relevance of design contributions. Equally important is reflective resilience: maintaining boundaries, seeking peer support and grounding influence in ethical clarity. These practices help sustain informal leadership in contexts where recognition and structural support may fluctuate.

Theoretically, the research advances discussions in both leadership and design studies by showing how relational, practice-based and adaptive leadership theories intersect in the lived work of designers. Leadership appears as a distributed, interpretive process mediated through artefacts, framing and relational trust rather than as a property of individuals occupying formal roles. At the same time, the study extends discussions of design maturity by showing how maturity conditions not only design outcomes but also the opportunities for designers to enact informal leadership. The integrated framework helps bridge leadership-as-practice and sociotechnical perspectives, illustrating how meaning-making, artefacts and organisational structures jointly shape influence.

These contributions are bounded by the characteristics of the empirical context. The findings reflect the experiences of a small group of mid-career designers working in predominantly Finnish, low-power-distance organisations. While this enabled rich exploration of relational and facilitative influence, it also means that the mechanisms described may operate differently in more hierarchical, culturally distant or high-pressure environments. Methodologically, the reliance on self-reported interviews, rather than observational or longitudinal data, limits the analysis to participants' own interpretations of influence rather than capturing influence as it unfolds in real time. These contextual and methodological boundaries also point to the need for further inquiry; Section 5.7 outlines concrete avenues for such work, including extending the model across different organisational and cultural settings and examining how emerging human–AI leadership arrangements reshape trust-based sensemaking.

Overall, the study illustrates that leadership in design is neither accidental nor peripheral. It resides in the everyday acts of framing, facilitating, translating and reflecting that help organisations think more clearly and act more coherently. Designers lead when they create the conditions under which others can collaborate, learn and decide together. In this sense, informal leadership is less a role than a practice, one that emerges through relationships, is sustained through ethical clarity and becomes transformative through collective sensemaking. As organisations confront increasing complexity, the relational and interpretive capacities embedded in design practice may become not only valuable but essential to their ability to adapt and learn.

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# APPENDIX A: FINNISH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

## 1. Taustatiedot

*Tavoite: ymmärtää vastaajan asema, kokemus ja konteksti*

- Mitä teet työksesi nyt ja millainen on roolisi tiimissäsi tai organisaatiossasi?
- Miten päädyit muotoilijaksi? Kerro lyhyesti kokemuksestasi ja taustastasi.
- Millaisissa projekteissa tai tilanteissa toimit tällä hetkellä?
- Miten kuvailisit suhdettasi muihin rooleihin organisaatiossa (esim. Kehittäjät, po:t, johto)?

## 2. Vaikuttaminen ilman muodollista valtaa

*Tavoite: tunnistaa epävirallisen ja tilannesidonnaisen johtajuuden muodot*

- Osaatko kertoa tilanteen, jossa sait jotain tärkeää vietyä eteenpäin ilman virallista päätösvaltaa?
- Missä tilanteissa olet huomannut **ottavasi johtavan roolin ilman, että se on sinulle annettu**?
- Mitkä tekijät auttoivat sinua onnistumaan: ihmiset, verkostot, ajoitus?
- Entä tilanne, jossa **et onnistunut vaikuttamaan**: mitä opit siitä?
- Koetko, että **mahdollisuutesi vaikuttaa vaihtelevat tilanteen, tiimin tai henkilöiden mukaan**? Miten?
- Millaisia strategioita käytät, kun et ole päätöksenteossa mukana mutta haluat vaikuttaa?

## 3. Vertaisvaikuttaminen ja verkostot

*Tavoite: selvittää, miten epävirallinen vaikutus rakentuu suhteiden kautta*

- Millaisia **verkostoja tai luottamussuhteita** hyödynnät vaikuttamisessa?
- Miten haet tukea tai vaikutusvaltaa muilta asiantuntijoilta, jos ideasi kohtaa vastustusta?
- Onko sinulla kokemuksia siitä, että **verkostosi ovat auttaneet avaamaan oven strategiseen keskusteluun tai keskusteluun johdon kanssa**?
- Miten itse olet vaikuttanut siihen, kenen ääni kuuluu?

## 4. Roolit, identiteetti ja rajaneuvottelut

*Tavoite: ymmärtää, miten muotoilijan rooli haastetaan*

- Millaisissa tilanteissa **roolisi on kyseenalaistettu tai hämärtynyt**?
- Millä tavoin olet joutunut **neuvottelemaan tilastasi tai asemastasi**?
- Koetko, että olet välillä **"väärässä huoneessa"**: mukana keskusteluissa, **joihin ei odotettu muotoilijaa**?
- Miten navigoit tilanteissa, joissa odotukset rooliasi kohtaan eivät ole selkeitä?

## 5. Designin metodit ja strateginen vaikuttaminen

*Tavoite: tunnistaa, miten muotoilun keinot tukevat päätöksentekoa*

- Millaisia muotoilun metodeja tai keinoja käytät, kun haluat vaikuttaa päätöksiin?
- Kerro tilanteesta, jossa **muotoilun tuottama artefakti (esim. Prototyyppi tai palvelupolkukuvaus)** on muuttanut keskustelun suuntaa?
- Miten perustelet ehdotuksesi: millaista dataa, tarinaa tai esitystapaa käytät?
- Voitko kertoa tilanteesta, jossa käytit **narratiivia tai kokemuksellista kuvausta** vakuuttamisen keinona?
- Miten ihmiset reagoivat, kun tuot muotoilun menetelmiä päätöksenteon tueksi?

## 6. Organisaatiokulttuuri ja valtarakenteet

*Tavoite: tunnistaa piilossa olevia vaikuttamisen esteitä ja mahdollisuuksia*

- Millainen organisaatiokulttuuri teillä on vaikuttamisen näkökulmasta, kuka vaikuttaa päätöksiin?
- Koetko, että **päätöksenteko on läpinäkyvää**? Miksi tai miksi ei?
- Millaisia **organisaatiopoliittisia tilanteita olet kohdannut**, joissa muotoilun ääni ei kuulu?
- Miten käsittelet tilanteita, joissa **muotoilu jää teknisen tai liiketoiminnallisen logiikan jalkoihin**?

## 7. Tulevaisuus ja kehitys

*Tavoite: käytännön kehitysehdotuksia ja muotoilijan kasvupolku*

- Minkä ja miten sen pitäisi muuttua, jotta muotoilijat voisivat vaikuttaa enemmän?
- Miten rakenteita tai käytäntöjä voisi kehittää, jotta muotoilijan ääni kuuluisi paremmin?
- Mitä taitoja muotoilijoilta tarvitaan tulevaisuudessa vaikuttamisen näkökulmasta?
- Mitä itse haluaisit kehittää ollaksesi vaikuttavampi?

## 8. Loppu

*Tavoite: antaa tilaa spontaaneille oivalluksille*

- Onko jotain tärkeää, jota ei vielä kysytty, mutta haluaisit nostaa esiin?
- Jos saisit antaa yhden neuvon muotoilijalle, joka haluaa vaikuttaa ilman valtaa: mikä se olisi?

# APPENDIX B: ENGLISH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

## 1. Background information

- What is your current job, and what is your role in your team or organization?
- How did you become a designer? Please briefly describe your experience and background.
- What kinds of projects or situations are you currently involved in?
- How would you describe your relationship with other roles in the organization (e.g., developers, pos, management)?

## 2. Influencing without formal authority

- Can you describe a situation where you managed to push something important forward without having formal decision-making power?
- In what situations have you noticed yourself taking a leading role without being officially assigned one?
- What factors helped you succeed: people, networks, timing?
- How about a situation where you were not able to influence: what did you learn from it?
- Do you feel that your ability to influence varies depending on the situation, team, or individuals? How?
- What strategies do you use when you are not part of the decision-making process but still want to have influence?

## 3. Peer influence and networks

- What kinds of networks or trust relationships do you use when trying to influence?
- How do you seek support or influence from other experts if your idea faces resistance?
- Do you have experiences where your networks have helped open the door to strategic discussions or conversations with management?
- How have you personally influenced whose voice gets heard?

## 4. Roles, identity, and boundary negotiations

- In what situations has your role been questioned or become blurred?
- In what ways have you had to negotiate your position or status?
- Do you ever feel like you are “in the wrong room”: involved in discussions where a designer was not expected?
- How do you navigate situations where expectations for your role are unclear?

## 5. Design methods and strategic influence

- What kinds of design methods or tools do you use when you want to influence decisions?
- Can you describe a situation where a design artifact (e.g., prototype or service blueprint) shifted the direction of the discussion?
- How do you justify your proposals: what kind of data, narrative, or presentation style do you use?

- Can you describe a situation where you used storytelling or experiential description as a means of persuasion?
- How do people react when you bring design methods into decision-making?

## **6. Organizational culture and power structures**

- What is your organizational culture like from the perspective of influence: who influences decisions?
- Do you feel that decision-making is transparent? Why or why not?
- What kinds of organizational political situations have you encountered where the voice of design was not heard?
- How do you handle situations where design is overshadowed by technical or business logic?

## **7. Future and development**

- What should change, and how, so that designers could have more influence?
- How could structures or practices be developed to make the designer's voice better heard?
- What skills will designers need in the future in order to be influential?
- What would you personally like to develop in order to be more impactful?

## APPENDIX C: CODING SUMMARY

This appendix presents the complete coding framework developed through the grounded-theory analysis of six semi-structured interviews. The coding followed a three-stage procedure (glaser & strauss, 1967; charmaz, 2014):

1. Open coding, which was used to identify 676 meaning units from 216 interview answer notes from 6 participants.
2. Axial coding clustered them into 28 analytical categories representing recurrent mechanisms of influence.
3. Selective coding, which integrated these categories into six core themes forming the conceptual model of trust-based sensemaking and lateral influence in design practice.

Each axial category is linked to its theoretical anchor, interpretive meaning, and its position within the broader model. Together, the categories illustrate how designers construct informal leadership through credibility, trust, facilitation, framing, alignment, and reflexive resilience.

### Rationale for axial and selective coding

#### Why these axial categories

After open coding, axial coding was used to move beyond a long list of surface observations and identify how influence happens in design work. Codes were grouped when they described the same kind of mechanism or interaction designers used to lead without authority, such as using evidence, framing, facilitating, or negotiating boundaries.

Categories were kept if they appeared repeatedly across different participants and contexts, linked clearly to each other, and explained a part of the overall process. Overlapping codes were merged for clarity, while distinct mechanisms were kept separate. The goal was to describe a connected process, from the conditions that enable influence, through the actions that make it happen, to the outcomes that result and the factors that sustain it over time.

#### Why the analysis produced six selective themes

Selective coding combined the 28 axial categories into six higher-level themes that together explain the whole influence process. Each theme represents a functional stage or role in that process, and six themes were sufficient to capture all recurring mechanisms without losing focus. Fewer would have blurred important

differences (for example, between facilitation as an action and framing as a cognitive process), while more would have fragmented the story. The six therefore provide a clear, minimal structure that mirrors how participants described influence as a sequence:

### Integrative summary

Across these categories, the data reveal a coherent cyclical pattern:

1. Credibility and trust form the necessary preconditions for any influence to occur.
2. Facilitation and framing convert trust into collective understanding and meaning.
3. Alignment and learning translate understanding into organisational coherence and maturity.
4. Ethical and reflexive resilience sustains influence over time, preventing exhaustion and maintaining legitimacy.

This process collectively constitutes trust-based sensemaking: a dynamic, relational cycle through which designers lead without formal authority. Influence is not a fixed position, but an emergent, reiterative practice grounded in credibility, trust, facilitation, framing, and reflection.

### Full axial coding category summary

<i>Axial category</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Interpretive description</i>	<i>Position within model</i>
<i>Organisational context &amp; design maturity</i>	75	Captures how maturity, structure, and culture define the conditions under which designers can exercise informal leadership.	Credibility and professional legitimacy
<i>Boundary work &amp; negotiation</i>	40	Designers navigate professional and political boundaries, translating and reconciling conflicting expectations.	Ethical and reflexive resilience
<i>Learning &amp; reflexive practice</i>	35	Continuous reflection and learning processes that expand understanding and reinforce adaptive capacity.	Alignment and organisational learning
<i>Adaptive problem-solving &amp; systems thinking</i>	34	Seeing interdependencies and reframing issues as systemic challenges rather than isolated tasks.	Alignment and organisational learning
<i>Communication &amp; narrative design</i>	34	Constructing influence through storytelling, framing, and discursive leadership.	Framing and translation
<i>Network building &amp; social capital</i>	34	Developing trust networks and alliances that enable influence without authority.	Relational trust and psychological safety
<i>Evidence &amp; data-driven persuasion</i>	33	Using evidence, metrics, and research to legitimise design arguments and reinforce expertise.	Credibility and professional legitimacy
<i>Facilitation &amp; co-creation</i>	28	Structuring dialogue and enabling participatory decision-making across functions.	Facilitation and co-creation
<i>Artefacts as influence tools</i>	28	Visual and material artefacts—maps, prototypes, blueprints—used to translate complexity into shared understanding.	Facilitation and co-creation
<i>Role identity &amp; positioning</i>	27	Negotiating self-definition and legitimacy within shifting organisational structures.	Credibility and professional legitimacy

<i>Method literacy &amp; capability expansion</i>	23	Demonstrating multidisciplinary fluency and broadening the perceived scope of design competence.	Credibility and professional legitimacy
<i>Collaboration &amp; collective agency</i>	22	Shared ownership and distributed action among teams; leadership as co-creation.	Facilitation and co-creation
<i>Identity resilience &amp; self-care</i>	21	Managing emotional load, ambiguity, and overextension in boundary-spanning roles.	Ethical and reflexive resilience
<i>Boundary spanning leadership</i>	21	Acting as a connector across organisational silos, facilitating understanding and translation.	Facilitation and co-creation
<i>Advocacy &amp; ethical stewardship</i>	20	Upholding user and societal values, positioning design as moral and ethical guidance.	Ethical and reflexive resilience
<i>Framing &amp; reframing practices</i>	19	Defining what constitutes the problem and what counts as a legitimate solution through reframing.	Framing and translation
<i>Power navigation &amp; political awareness</i>	19	Understanding power dynamics and using political awareness to advance influence constructively.	Framing and translation
<i>Behavioral agency &amp; development</i>	19	Taking initiative, demonstrating ownership, and learning to influence through action.	Ethical and reflexive resilience
<i>Strategic alignment &amp; organisational integration</i>	19	Translating design reasoning into organisational strategy and aligning practices with shared goals.	Alignment and organisational learning
<i>Credibility &amp; professional legitimacy</i>	18	Being recognised as reliable and competent; earning permission to lead without authority.	Credibility and professional legitimacy
<i>Ethical &amp; moral reflexivity</i>	18	Reflecting on ethical implications of leadership and decision-making within design practice.	Ethical and reflexive resilience
<i>Translation &amp; boundary-spanning communication</i>	15	Adapting vocabulary and framing to make knowledge accessible across domains.	Framing and translation
<i>Trust &amp; psychological safety</i>	14	Creating conditions for open dialogue, experimentation, and interpersonal safety.	Relational trust and psychological safety
<i>Visibility &amp; recognition work</i>	14	Making invisible design contributions visible through communication and evidence of value.	Credibility and professional legitimacy
<i>Relational influence mechanisms</i>	12	Reciprocity, empathy, and social attunement as vehicles for influence.	Relational trust and psychological safety
<i>Temporal &amp; kairos awareness</i>	11	Recognising the right timing and situational readiness for intervention and leadership.	Framing and translation
<i>Cultural change &amp; maturity building</i>	11	Gradual transformation of organisational norms toward design-oriented learning culture.	Alignment and organisational learning
<i>Mentorship &amp; peer learning</i>	8	Informal exchange of knowledge and support within professional networks.	Alignment and organisational learning
<i>Informal leadership behaviours</i>	4	Everyday acts of initiative, coordination, and example-setting that constitute leadership practice.	Relational trust and psychological safety

Table C1 axial coding categories

## Selective coding categorisation

<i>Selective theme</i>	<i>Function in the model</i>	<i>Representative mechanisms</i>
1. <i>Credibility and professional legitimacy</i>	Foundational condition: establishing competence and perceived reliability.	Organisational context & design maturity; evidence & data-driven persuasion; method literacy; visibility & recognition work; role identity & positioning
2. <i>Relational trust and psychological safety</i>	Relational condition: building and maintaining interpersonal trust.	Trust & psychological safety; network building & social capital; relational influence; informal leadership behaviours
3. <i>Facilitation and co-creation</i>	Mechanism of action: enabling dialogue, inclusion, and shared understanding.	Facilitation & co-creation; collaboration & collective agency; boundary-spanning leadership; artefacts as influence tools
4. <i>Framing and translation</i>	Cognitive mechanism: reframing, storytelling, translation across logics.	Communication & narrative design; framing & reframing; translation & boundary communication; power navigation; temporal/kairos awareness
5. <i>Alignment and organisational learning</i>	Outcome: shared understanding, strategic coherence, maturity.	Strategic alignment & integration; systems thinking; learning & reflexive practice; cultural change & maturity; mentorship & peer learning
6. <i>Ethical and reflexive resilience</i>	Sustaining condition: ethical integrity and emotional balance.	Advocacy & ethical stewardship; moral reflexivity; identity resilience & self-care; boundary work & negotiation; behavioral agency

**Table C2 selective coding results**

## Illustrative quotes from the interview notes

<i>Selective theme</i>	<i>Illustrative quotes (finnish, with (participant id) and [meaning unit])</i>
1. <i>Credibility and professional legitimacy</i>	<p>“olen tykästynyt data-johdettuun muotoiluun. ‘käyttäjät sano näin’ ei riitä.” (p1) [evidence]</p> <p>“nimesin itseni head of designiksi... menin hallitukselle esittelyihin.” (p3) [visibility/positioning]</p> <p>“design vanhenee... periaatteiden pitää muuttua, tarvitaan liiketoimintaymmärrystä.” (p5) [method literacy]</p> <p>“low-fi prototyypillä saatiin asia suorilta läpi... työtä puoleksi vuodeksi.” (p6) [proof-of-value]</p> <p>“hain feasibility-tukea deviltä, toin mittareita ja dataa.” (p6) [credibility via evidence]</p>
2. <i>Relational trust and psychological safety</i>	<p>“auttaa kun on paljon tekemisissä ihmisten kanssa... saa äänensä kuuluviin.” (p1) [network]</p> <p>“luottamus on vaikuttamisen valuutta.” (p4) [trust]</p> <p>“yritän varmistaa, ettei vain äänekkäimmät tule kuulluiksi.” (p4) [psychological safety]</p> <p>“haen liittolaisia varhain (erityisesti kehittäjistä).” (p3) [alliances]“luottamus on kasvanut, kun kokeneet osajat näyttivät esimerkkiä.”</p>

	(p5) [team trust]
3. Facilitation and co-creation	<p>“workshopit tekee näkymättömät oletukset näkyviksi.”          (p1) [facilitation]          “osallistan tiimiä kysymysten suunnittelussa... muotoilutyö myös muiden työtä.”          (p1) [co-creation]          “prototyyppi keskustelun välineenä: ‘vihdoinkin hiekkalaatikko, jonka ympärille pääsee kaikki’.”          (p1) [artefact]          “fasilitoinnilla varmistaa, että eri roolit saavat tilaa.”          (p4) [inclusive facilitation]          “eka versio storyboardina... toinen opetteli työkalun.”          (p6) [boundary spanning via artefact]</p>
4. Framing and translation	<p>“ei kannata puhua muotoilusta vaan asiakaskeisistä liiketoiminnan kehittämisestä.”          (p2) [translation to business]          “kysyn ‘tyhmiä kysymyksiä’ ja teen oletukset näkyviksi.”          (p3) [reframing]          “datan, narratiivin ja visuaalisuuden yhdistelmä toimii.”          (p4) [story+data]          “jos tutkimus jätetään väliin, käydään riskiskenaario läpi.”          (p2) [risk framing]          “ajoitus voi olla pielessä, vaikka argumentti olisi hyvä.”          (p4) [timing/kairos]</p>
5. Alignment and organisational learning	<p>“kun kartta oli pöydällä, liiketoimintavastaava muutti prioriteetit.” (p4)          [alignment via artefact]          “retroissa kuormitus näkyväksi → lisää suunnittelijaresursseja.” (p6)          [learning loop]          “muotoilun mukaanotto aikaisemmin lisää päätösten läpinäkyvyyttä.”          (p5) [process learning]          “muotoiluajattelun demokratisoiminen ja coaching.”          (p2) [maturity building]          “kulttuuri muuttuu arjen kosketuspisteissä: devien kyky tunnistaa muotoilun paikka on keskeistä.”          (p6) [capability diffusion]</p>
6. Ethical and reflexive resilience	<p>“atleast it’s me... voin yrittää vähentää haittoja.”          (p4) [ethical stewardship]          “valitsen taistelut, joskus vaihdan ympäristöä.”          (p3) [boundaries]          “en tykkää kun ihmisiä heitetään bussin alle.”          (p3) [ethical stance]          “kompromissit, jotta saadaan näyttöä hyödyistä.”          (p1) [pragmatic ethics]          “nuorena naisena toin dataa ja feasibilityä vastaväitteisiin.”          (p6) [resilience via evidence]</p>

**Table C3 selected quotes from notes of the participant interviews with open theming examples tied to selected coding categories**

## APPENDIX D: DESIGNER-LEADER PERSONAS

This appendix documents the construction, synthesis, and analytical positioning of the six designer-leader personas (p1–p6) that form the empirical backbone of the results chapters.

### D.1 persona construction process

#### Source material and coding linkage

Persona development was grounded in 676 meaning units identified during open coding (see chapter 3.4 and appendix c). For each interviewee, coded segments related to *role identity*, *influence strategies*, *values*, and *organisational positioning* were collated and cross-referenced to transcripts.

#### Attribute clustering

Codes were grouped into thematic clusters: e.g., *trust building*, *facilitation*, *ethical framing*, *translation*, *narrative persuasion*, *data-driven persuasion*. Within each case, clusters were reviewed for internal coherence and recurring self-descriptions.

#### Narrative synthesis

Clustered attributes were integrated into short, comparable profiles covering background, motivations, influence logic, tactics, strengths, challenges, and typical contexts.

The structure follows cooper (1999), pruit & grudin (2003), and nielsen (2013), treating personas as analytical artefacts that condense empirical richness into interpretable form.

#### Cross-persona comparison

Draft personas were compared to identify shared mechanisms (e.g., facilitation, framing, trust-building) and differentiating orientations (e.g., rhetorical vs analytical persuasion).

These patterns informed the typology in chapter 4.5 and the six influence mechanisms presented in section 4.2.

#### Validation and transparency

Each persona was checked against original transcripts to ensure representational accuracy and to avoid stereotyping. Summaries were then condensed into comparative tables.

## Outcome

six composite personas balancing individual authenticity with analytical generalisation.

They serve as a bridge between qualitative data and theoretical interpretation, illustrating how designers exercise *informal and lateral leadership* in organisational contexts.

## D.2 synthesised persona descriptions

Each persona represents a distinct configuration of *how designers influence without authority*. The voices below are interpretive syntheses that merge multiple participant statements into coherent, characteristic expressions of informal leadership.

### P1: the facilitating networker

#### Identity & orientation

Socially fluent designer who leads through relationships, timing, and empathy. Thrives in ambiguous, multi-stakeholder settings and focuses on creating shared language rather than control.

#### Behaviour & methods

Makes design work transparent; convenes workshops and journey sessions; translates user evidence into others' vocabulary.

#### Strengths

Builds psychological safety; converts ambiguity into common understanding; enables coordinated action.

#### Constraints

Influence fades where leadership is defined as authority or technical dominance.

#### Representative composite quote

“i don’t wait to be invited anymore—i just say we’ll do this study and show what we learn. When i translate findings into their language, people start listening. Once everyone sees the same picture, the conversation changes.”

## P2: the ethical facilitator

### Identity & orientation

Grounds leadership in values such as accessibility, inclusion, and user rights while translating ethics into business logic.

### Behaviour & methods

Frames decisions through user evidence and moral consequences; cultivates sponsors; blends empathy with outcome metrics.

### **Strengths**

moral credibility and dependable facilitation; stabilises ethical norms in projects.

### **Constraints**

value misalignment and instrumental cultures deplete influence.

### Representative composite quote

“i try to speak the language of business, so empathy doesn’t sound like idealism. Sometimes you need a sponsor who fights for the same things—someone who sees that accessibility or user rights are strategy, not decoration.”

## P3: the bold storyteller

### Identity & orientation

Narrative-driven designer who reframes organisational assumptions and mobilises change through vision and charisma.

### Behaviour & methods

Uses storytelling, visuals, and self-initiated visibility; reframes issues at strategic level; challenges inertia.

### Strengths

Creates momentum and executive engagement; brings design into strategic dialogue.

### Constraints

Confrontational style may trigger resistance; sustained impact depends on supportive context.

### Representative composite quote

“if the door is closed, i’ll find another way in. You can’t convince with data alone—people move when they feel the story. Courage is the price of making change real.”

## P4: the bridge builder

### Identity & orientation

Experienced translator between user, business, and technology domains; connects perspectives through concrete artefacts.

### Behaviour & methods

Produces service maps and prototypes; facilitates co-planning; mediates tension through transparency.

### Strengths

Cross-role empathy; creation of common language; embeds organisational learning.

### Constraints

Continuous role negotiation; emotional load of being the interpreter.

### Representative composite quote

“most of my work is translation. Trust is the currency of influence, and you earn it by making things visible: a map, a prototype, something everyone can point at.”

## P5: the reflective change agent

### Identity & orientation

Inquiry-oriented designer who enables reflection and collective learning from a liminal, partly strategic position.

### Behaviour & methods

Uses socratic questioning and workshops to reveal assumptions; facilitates psychological safety and sensemaking.

### Strengths

Deep analytical reflection; strengthens group maturity and learning culture.

### Constraints

Mandate ambiguity and emotional labour; influence can become invisible.

### Representative composite quote

“i ask the questions no one else does, sometimes the ones no one dares to ask. When the space feels safe, even though conversations become learning moments.”

## P6: the analytical materialiser

### Identity & orientation

Evidence-oriented designer who leads through data, prototypes, and demonstrable outcomes.

### Behaviour & methods

Builds low-fidelity demos and metrics; collaborates with developers; anchors debates in feasibility and measurement.

### Strengths

High technical credibility; translates ideas into testable artefacts; drives evidence-based decision-making.

### Constraints

Dependence on access to decision forums; achievements may remain unseen without communication.

Representative composite quote

“when words don’t work, i show it. A quick prototype cuts through politics: it turns opinion into observation. Data and persistence move an idea from talk to action.”

## Typological overview

Type	Personas	Dominant mode	Characteristic mechanisms
Facilitative builders	P1 · p2 · p4 · p5	Trust, dialogue, translation, shared understanding	Facilitation · framing · Alignment · learning
Proactive Challenger	P3	Narrative reframing and visible drive	Framing · credibility · Momentum
Evidence builder	P6	Data-backed artefacts and measurable outcomes	Credibility · learning · transparency

**Table D3 typological overview**

## D.3 crosswalk matrix and theoretical linkages

### Summary structure

The list below links each persona to the research questions (rq1–rq2), influence mechanisms (sec. 4.2), theoretical anchors (ch. 2), power/ethics orientation, and effective design-maturity context. (presented here in list format, for easier integration into the text document format)

#### P1: facilitating networker

- **Influence:** indirect, timing-savvy, relationship-led.
- **Enablers / constraints:** stakeholder access and sponsorship enable; opaque governance hinders.
- **Methods:** workshops, journeys, prototypes, user stories.
- **Contribution:** turns ambiguity into shared options; de-risks choices.
- **Strategy view:** strategy as dialogue and prioritised experimentation.
- **Mechanisms:** trust · facilitation · framing · alignment.
- **Anchors:** relational / distributed leadership; lap.
- **Power & ethics:** prestige via credibility and steadiness.
- **Design maturity:** mid to high maturity amplifies influence; low maturity demands persistent legitimising.

#### P2: ethical facilitator

- **Influence:** values-anchored facilitation and moral credibility.

- **Enablers / constraints:** psychological safety enables; hierarchy or value clashes constrain.
- **Methods:** prototyping with user data; accessibility advocacy.
- **Contribution:** grounds choices in responsibility; stabilises norms.
- **Strategy view:** strategy as principled, outcome-oriented framing.
- **Mechanisms:** ethical resilience · trust · facilitation · alignment.
- **Anchors:** transformational / value-based · discursive leadership.
- **Power & ethics:** prestige through moral authority; avoids dominance.
- **Design maturity:** operates in mid maturity; culture-shaping in high.

### P3: bold storyteller

- **Influence:** direct challenge via narrative and vision.
- **Enablers / constraints:** sponsoring leaders enable; rigid hierarchies resist.
- **Methods:** vision stories, concept pitches, narrative reframing.
- **Contribution:** reframes problems; mobilises momentum.
- **Strategy view:** strategy as reframing the crux and mobilising people.
- **Mechanisms:** credibility · framing · translation.
- **Anchors:** discursive / communicative · adaptive leadership.
- **Power & ethics:** narrative capital; ethical candour.
- **Design maturity:** effective in low to mid maturity; requires guardrails as maturity increases.

### P4: bridge builder

- **Influence:** diplomatic translation across domains.
- **Enablers / constraints:** early involvement and dual access enable; role ambiguity drains.
- **Methods:** service maps · prototypes · tension-diffusing facilitation.
- **Contribution:** creates shared language; embeds organisational learning.
- **Strategy view:** strategy as coherent, testable portfolio.
- **Mechanisms:** facilitation · framing · alignment · learning.
- **Anchors:** lap · boundary work · sensemaking.
- **Power & ethics:** prestige through cross-role competence; reciprocity ethics.
- **Design maturity:** strong in mid to high maturity; seeds maturity in mid.

### P5: reflective change agent

- **Influence:** opens thinking through inquiry and reflection.
- **Enablers / constraints:** sponsorship for inquiry enables; liminality fatigue constrains.
- **Methods:** socratic questioning · reflective workshops · light artefacts.
- **Contribution:** builds shared diagnosis; nurtures learning loops.
- **Strategy view:** strategy as collective inquiry and option shaping.
- **Mechanisms:** trust · facilitation · ethical resilience.
- **Anchors:** relational · adaptive · psychological-safety leadership.
- **Power & ethics:** prestige via integrity and curiosity; ethics of care.
- **Design maturity:** works across maturities; needs protection in low maturity.

### P6: analytical materialiser

- **Influence:** evidence-first persuasion through data to demo to story.
- **Enablers / constraints:** developer partnerships enable; asymmetry and limited forums constrain.
- **Methods:** rapid mock-ups · metrics · feasibility sparring.
- **Contribution:** converts debate into decision; anchors learning in data.

- **Strategy view:** strategy as hypothesis testing and scaling validated wins.
- **Mechanisms:** credibility · alignment · learning (through evidence).
- **Anchors:** lap (material practice) · design-ops · experimentation.
- **Power & ethics:** expert power; ethics of transparency and objectivity.
- **Design maturity:** strong in low to mid technical contexts; scales in high maturity.

## Cross-persona mechanism map

Mechanism (sec 4.2)	Dominant personas
Credibility & professional legitimacy	P6 (evidence), P3 (vision), P4 (cross-role competence), P1–p2–p5 (consistency)
Relational trust & psychological safety	P1, p2, p4, p5 (primary); P3 via integrity; P6 via dependable evidence
Facilitation & co-creation	P1, p2, p4, p5 (core); P6 via demo-led co-creation; P3 via narrative mobilisation
Framing & translation	P3 (reframing), P4 (translation), P1–p2–p5 (co-framing), P6 (evidence framing)
Alignment & organisational learning	P4, p5, p1, p2 (sustain); P6 (anchors); P3 (triggers reframing)
Ethical & reflexive resilience	P2 (core); P5 (sustains); P1/p4 (practice); P3 (candour); P6 (transparency)

**Table D4 cross persona mechanisms**

## APPENDIX E. INFLUENCE MAP

This appendix expands on a feature of the influence model. The roles discussed are not derived from the empirical interviews but are included to clarify the conceptual landscape and the model's broader applicability.

The concentration of designer personas along a narrow diagonal band from the relational–facilitative to the structural–analytical pole may indicate the characteristic hybrid orientation of design practice. Designers habitually act as boundary spanners: they convene stakeholders and surface assumptions (relational/facilitative work) and then convert those insights into artefacts, prototypes and implementation logic (structural/analytical work). This dual requirement is reinforced by the design toolkit itself, artefacts serve both as convening devices and as tests of feasibility, and by organisational role differentiation, which often delegates pure facilitation or pure technical governance to other specialist roles. The diagonal therefore reflects both the methodological identity of designers (tolerate ambiguity, then reduce it via materialisation) and pragmatic constraints of organisational practice: to exercise influence without formal authority, designers must combine trust-building with demonstrable evidence.



**Figure E1 extended influence map.**

The Figure E1 displays the six empirically derived designer personas (p1–p6) and three illustrative it roles (x1–x3). P1–p6 are plotted according to their primary mode of influence (facilitative to analytical) and primary focus of work (structural to relational). X1–x3 are conceptual comparison points included to clarify the interpretive boundaries of the model.

Observed gap 1: the lower-left quadrant (structural–facilitative)

The lower-left quadrant represents actors who exercise influence primarily through facilitation while focusing on organisational structures, workflows and delivery processes. Typical activities associated with this quadrant include coordinating cadence rituals, surfacing and removing impediments, mapping handoffs and dependencies, and formalising governance or escalation paths. Representative professional roles include scrum masters, team-level agile coaches, kanban flow facilitators, and certain design ops (execution-focused) practitioners.

### Why designers did not appear here in this sample.

The empirical participants were practising designers whose core remit emphasised sensemaking, framing and artefact-driven persuasion. Although several interviewees described operational friction and cross-team coordination, none identified their primary professional identity as delivery/process facilitator at the team-or-portfolio level. This likely reflects two contextual factors: (a) the sample frame, which targeted design-practitioner identities rather than formal delivery roles, and (b) organisational role differentiation in which explicit delivery-facilitation is often formalised (e.g., scrum master) and therefore falls outside the scope of informal design leadership.

### Interpretive implication.

The sparsity of designers in this quadrant should not be taken to mean that facilitative–structural work is unimportant for design impact. Rather, it indicates that, within the contexts sampled, facilitative structural work tends to be institutionalised as a distinct function (with its own career paths and role descriptions). In turn, designers typically orient toward relational and interpretive work or toward analytic/materialising tasks.

### Observed gap 2: the upper-right quadrant (relational–analytical)

The upper-right quadrant denotes hybrid actors who combine high analytical capability (rigorous evidence, modelling, measurable proofs) with strong relational influence (trusted advisory relationships, executive sponsorship, ongoing negotiation). Roles that typically inhabit this space include design strategists, solution consultants (enterprise-level), senior product leaders, and senior client-facing

technical architects. These actors pair quantitative/qualitative rigour with sustained political capital and access to senior decision forums.

### Why designers did not appear here in this sample.

While elements of relational–analytical behaviour are present among the interviewed designers (notably the reflective change agent), the sample did not include senior hybrid strategists operating at portfolio or executive level. Two likely explanations are (a) the sample composition, which focused on practicing designers rather than senior strategic or client-facing leaders, and (b) role distribution in larger organisations where strategic hybrid functions often sit at director/c-suite or enterprise-consultancy levels and therefore fall outside the mid-level practitioner pool.

### Interpretive implication.

The empty upper-right quadrant highlights a boundary condition of the empirical study: the personas map the forms of informal influence that mid-level design practitioners most commonly enact. The model nonetheless anticipates the existence of senior hybrid roles that combine analytical credibility with relational leverage; such roles should be considered when the model is applied at portfolio, enterprise, or consultancy scales.

## The extended influence map and illustrative roles

Figure E1 (in this appendix) presents the extended influence map that includes the six empirical personas (p1–p6) and three illustrative it roles (x1–x3): x1 scrum master / agile coach (lower-left), x2 design strategist (upper-right), and x3 solution consultant (upper-right, more analytical). These illustrative points are not empirical data but conceptual anchors that help interpret the emptier regions of the map and show how the influence landscape spans adjacent professional identities and how other typical roles fit on the map.

### Notes on interpretation

The appended roles function as conceptual references: they show where known professional identities sit relative to the empirically derived personas, aiding readers in mapping the model to organisational practice.

Including these roles clarifies that the model is not design-exclusive; it is a socio-technical influence map applicable to designers and to other actor types whose work intersects with design practice.

Because the appended roles are illustrative, the extended map should be treated as a heuristic rather than as a set of additional findings.

## Practical and theoretical implications of the empty quadrants

### For practice

Organisations seeking to strengthen design influence should recognise that some supporting functions (e.g., delivery facilitation, enterprise strategy) are often institutionalised in non-design roles. Where those functions are missing, design teams may need to either adopt facilitative–structural practices or seek formal partnerships with operations and delivery functions.

### For theory

The gaps underscore that informal leadership is bounded by organisational role structures and seniority. The model therefore differentiates between, the forms of influence that designers can enact informally and hybrid roles that combine informal influence with formal authority or cross-portfolio mandates.

### For future research

Empirical work that samples senior strategists, design-operational leads, or delivery facilitators could test whether these quadrants become more densely populated in different organisational contexts (e.g., large enterprises, consultancies, or government programmes).

## APPENDIX F. PRACTITIONER GUIDE: SUPPORTING INFORMAL DESIGN LEADERSHIP IN ORGANISATIONS

This appendix translates the empirical findings of the thesis into practical guidance for organisations, managers, and teams. While the main chapters present a theoretical and empirical analysis of informal leadership in design, the purpose of this appendix is to offer actionable tools, checklists, and practical recommendations that practitioners can apply when supporting designers who lead without formal authority.

These materials are not part of the analytical findings but are derived from them. They are intended for organisations seeking to strengthen design capability, improve cross-functional collaboration, and recognise how designers contribute to decision-making in socio-technical environments.

### Recognising informal design leadership

The six designer-leader personas (p1–p6) represent recurring influence patterns observed in the study. Managers and teams can use the descriptions below to identify how these modes appear in practice.

Persona (code)	Key signs (how they show up)	Typical indicators (what you might hear/see)	Recommended support (what managers can do)
<b>P1 facilitating networker</b>	Builds trust quickly; convenes people; runs inclusive workshops	“we understand each other better now.” / workshops produce shared commitments	Give early access to stakeholder meetings; protect time for facilitation; avoid overloading with emotional labour
<b>P2 ethical facilitator</b>	Surfaces ethical issues; invites quieter voices; maintains inclusivity	Raises values/ethics in discussions; reframes decisions through inclusion	Treat ethical framing as strategic work; provide sponsors when values conflict with delivery pressure
<b>P3 bold storyteller</b>	Reframes problems via narrative; provokes strategic reflection	Uses compelling stories to change perspective; challenges assumptions	Pair with analytical partners; include in strategic framing workshops; protect space for visionary moves
<b>P4 bridge builder</b>	Translates between business, tech and design; reduces friction via synthesis	Creates artefacts that clarify trade-offs; negotiates between teams	Give cross-team visibility; protect time for translation and synthesis; recognise translation work

Persona (code)	Key signs (how they show up)	Typical indicators (what you might hear/see)	Recommended support (what managers can do)
<b>P5 reflective change agent</b>	Facilitates learning; runs retrospectives; surfaces systemic tensions	Asks reflective questions; prompts learning loops and changes in practice	Involve in capability development; allow time for reflection and inquiry; sponsor retrospectives
<b>P6 analytical material- iser</b>	Produces prototypes and evidence that advance decisions; links design to feasibility	Demonstrates prototypes, data, feasibility cases; works with engineering	Grant early access to decision-makers; recognise prototypes as strategic evidence; connect them with engineering & product leads

**Table F1 recognising informal design leadership: signs and recommended support**

## Organisational conditions that enable designer-led influence

The study shows that informal leadership thrives when organisational conditions support both relational and analytical work.

### Key enabling conditions

- Psychological safety: designers need to surface tensions without fear of repercussion.
- Early involvement: influence is strongest when designers enter framing conversations upstream.
- Cross-functional access: designers must reach product, engineering, business and customer stakeholders.
- Recognition of facilitation as leadership: facilitative work is often invisible but critical for alignment.
- Design maturity structures: shared vocabulary, routines, and strategic roles support sustained influence.

### Conditions that constrain influence

- High hierarchy and rigid ownership boundaries
- Delivery pressure that prioritises speed over learning
- Lack of clarity about role expectations
- Minimal access to decision forums

- Technical or business-dominant cultures that undervalue sensemaking

## Practical checklists for managers and teams

### Checklist: how to support informal design leaders

- Involve designers early in problem framing
- Invite them to strategy and planning rituals
- Recognise facilitation, synthesis and visualisation as leadership work
- Provide regular forums for cross-functional learning
- Protect time for preparation and follow-up
- Encourage collaboration with engineering and product leads
- Address structural blockers (e.g., siloed kpis, unclear decision rights)

### Checklist: strengthening design influence in low-maturity contexts

- Start by legitimising facilitation
- Use evidence and prototypes as shared decision tools
- Establish light-weight research routines
- Pair designers with cross-functional allies
- Frame design outcomes in business-relevant language
- Demonstrate small wins that build credibility

## Common pitfalls in supporting designer-led leadership

- Assuming facilitation is “soft work”: facilitation often requires complex emotional and organisational labour.
- Over-relying on one designer as “the glue”: this leads to burnout; relational and translation work must be shared.
- Bringing designers in too late: limits influence to tactical adjustments rather than strategic shaping.

- Expecting designers to carry structural problems alone: some issues require organisational redesign, not individual effort.
- Treating prototypes as deliverables rather than leadership tools: prototypes create shared understanding; their value is strategic, not just visual.

## How to recognise and develop informal leadership capability

Design leaders often emerge informally. Managers can support growth by:

- Providing access to decision-makers
- Offering support in conflict-heavy or ambiguous spaces
- Encouraging reflective practice and continuous learning
- Creating cross-team opportunities to translate and mediate
- Structuring joint rituals (e.g., reviews, retros) where designers can shape conversation

## Summary

This practitioner appendix complements the analytical chapters by offering practical tools for recognising and supporting informal design leadership. While the main text presents an empirical and theoretical account of how designers influence decision-making without formal authority, the guidance here aims to help organisations apply those insights in everyday practice. These tools can support design maturity, improve collaboration, and foster healthier cross-functional environments where informal leadership can thrive.