

LEVELING UP: A FRAMEWORK FOR HIGH PERFORMING TEAMS

By Heather Phillips, Design Manager at Designer Fund. This version of the framework was presented at Source, a design leadership summit hosted by Designer Fund and Foundation Capital, on February 10, 2017.

	STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3	STAGE 4
COMPANY STAGE	You have one or two designers. They're both generalists who are able to go deep in their areas of expertise. Your team brings in contractors to fill in the gaps.	You have a design team of 2-5 people. An experienced designer is stepping up to lead. Your team is mostly composed of generalists with unique backgrounds, and you start hiring specialists to support the company's goals.	You have a Head of Design. Design managers and leads are building their respective teams. In addition to specialists, you support junior designers seeking mentorship and growth opportunities.	You have a VP of Design, there are leaders for different design divisions, with layers of management within each, you have built out creative teams around areas most critical to your business.
	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4
PROCESS & DOCUMENTATION	You have no agreed upon design process. There is no standardized workflow. Check-ins, critiques, and reviews are ad hoc, if they even happen at all.	Your team has started documenting their design decisions. You have a working style guide and a clear way to share files with fellow designers and handoff assets to engineers.	You have style guides for different areas of design maintained by product/ engineering/ marketing. You have a process in place to onboard new designers to your team, equipping them with the tools they need to work effectively.	Your team's process is clearly defined and all designers use it as a guiding framework for their work. You have defined principles and values, clear owners of the visual language, interaction standards, and more. The team shares work regularly and actively seeks feedback on their process.
COMMUNICATION & COLLABORATION	Your design team's methods of communication are fluid, most conversations happen in person, and in collaborative working sessions with your cross-functional team.	In addition to face-to-face conversations, your design team now has different modes of communication—Slack for quick feedback, Wake for in-depth feedback, etc. You're still learning to how to communicate most effectively within your growing team.	Your design team has agreed upon rules for communicating effectively. Designers are clear in their feedback and understand how to give it so people are receptive. In the broader company, people are open, regularly seeking feedback and input from design.	Your team has done facilitation training and difficult conversation training. Designers follow well-defined rules around critique—designers are clear about asking for the type of feedback they want. You effectively communicate with external partners about how to best work with design.
CRITIQUE & FEEDBACK	You don't have a formal critique process. Designers help facilitate feedback from other members of your team in addition to seeking outside perspectives from designers in the community.	Your design team has time set aside each week for critiques in which they share progress and elicit feedback from other designers. Impromptu conversations are happening in between weekly critiques to keep momentum.	Your team hosts critiques at key points of the design process, and invites key stakeholders to participate. These critiques have a schedule for who is presenting and clear rules for engagement. You use this opportunity to educate non-designers on how to give productive feedback. In addition, you introduce more scalable methods of collecting feedback over Slack, Wake, etc.	Design managers are responsible for scheduling and facilitating critiques for their respective teams. The design team proactively assesses all work produced by the company, even work outside of design, and has a process in place for improving it. Works in progress are visible to the broader company by way of pin-ups, internal tools, and design team announcements.
DEVELOPMENT & COACHING	You have opportunities to learn from your colleagues, but there's no other design expertise at the company so you have to find it elsewhere.	Your design team has budget for professional development to put towards internal workshops, coaching and attending external conferences and classes.	You bring in industry experts to develop your team. Designers participate in opportunities like Bridge and are encouraged to set up plans for skill development with their managers.	In addition to professional development opportunities made available to your entire design team, your Head of Design has a dedicated leadership coach, and the company offers similar services to up-and-coming design leaders.
RECRUITING & LEVELING	You have yet to hire an in-house recruiter. Designers on the team are responsible for preparing job descriptions, defining the interview process, and sourcing from their own design networks.	You have an in-house recruiter to help with sourcing and scheduling, but the design team drives the interview process and defines assessment criteria. Designers at your company are active in the broader community and use their connections as a source of referrals.	You have an in-house recruiter focused on building your design team. You have created a clear hiring plan and corresponding job descriptions. Information is readily available about your design team's culture and process to share with candidates and attract inbound applicants.	Design roles, levels and compensation are clearly defined. You have a dedicated design recruiter and a refined process for assessing candidates. Interviewers have undergone training—questions and design challenges have been vetted to avoid bias. Your design team has a website to showcase the team and ethos.
SPACE & SEATING	Your entire company still fits in one room. As a designer, you're seated next to the engineer who's building what you're designing. You're likely in a co-working or temporary office space, you haven't invested in your environment in a meaningful way.	Your design team sits together, ensuring plenty of opportunities to collaborate with one another, as well as cross-functional teammates. You have areas to pin up work in progress, and hold collaborative work sessions. You have a design library with resources and inspiration.	Designers have a 'home base' for heads-down work. There is a design team common area for dedicated design sprints. Designers have access to a resource library and tools for printing, prototyping, and other forms of creative expression.	Design is influencing the space for the entire company. This impacts decisions around the floorplan, furnishing, the proximity of different departments and how they interact within the space. Design permeates the entire culture.