HOW LEARNING
PEOPLE SKILLS
CAN BE LIKE GAINING A
SUPERPOWER

A look at how interpersonal skills can help overcome job frustration and turn conflict into collaboration.

If you struggle in your job to receive appreciation for your contributions, find time to develop your skills and find meaning in your work, it's easy to feel frustrated. In particular as a web designer or developer, these needs often aren't met when colleagues and clients are afraid of change and seem to block your contributions; managers allocate limited time for design because they have unrealistic expectations; and departments fight between each other instead of working together.

It's no wonder that many web professionals suffer from burnout and depression. Imagine what your work would be like if you could find common ground with people who seem to have different perspectives; feel confident about your contributions; handle stressful situations (for example, difficult conversations) with grace; and learn how to calm yourself down.

You'll be able to do these things if you invest time

WORDS: Jonathan Kahn

ILLUSTRATION: Ben Mounsey

and effort in learning people skills. It takes time, but the pay-off is surprising, as if you've gained a superpower.

A few years ago a web designer or developer could create a website on their own. Today, to make digital services that meet customer needs, you need to work with people across several boundaries:

❯ Disciplines like interaction design, frontend and back-end development, content, user research.

❯ Departments in the organisation, like marketing, sales, product development, IT, customer support.

❯ Channels like desktop web, native mobile apps, social media, and maybe print and in-store.

Even for a small business website, you'll typically need to work with your client on user research and content strategy, which tend to be outside your remit. This boundary crossing requires you to collaborate, using a different set of skills to web design and development.

IT'S DIFFICULT

Technical skills are essential to your job, and you're constantly developing them by reading, following discussions on social media and attending conferences. Think back to when you started to learn a technical skill like HTML, CSS, or JavaScript. How did you feel?

If you're like most of us, you felt scared and overwhelmed. There's so much to learn, and it never ends; however accomplished you are with HTML (or whatever) today, there's always more to learn.

The same is true of people skills, often called 'soft skills' in business, like collaboration, coaching and leadership. You may have heard that you either have people skills or you don't, a myth that author and speaker Meri Williams calls 'the soft skills fairy', which is like saying, 'you can either code JavaScript or you can't'.

You didn't fall out of bed with expert web design and development skills, and the same is true of people skills.

Web work is full of conflict, whether it's between colleagues and clients who are afraid of change, managers with unrealistic expectations, or departments fighting over turf. The internet is a symbol of disruption for many people: perhaps their jobs are changing, their skills are

becoming obsolete, or their business model is threatened. You are on the front line of this disruption as you attempt to do digital work that you're proud of, a front line that's thick with unmet needs.

Our culture makes things worse. We try to avoid conflict, as if ignoring it will make it go away. We tip-toe around sensitive issues or send long emails instead of engaging face-to-face. We agree to a spec that we know will never work because it seems easier than risking an honest conversation. How many times have you made choices to avoid difficult conversations rather than doing what the project needs? I've done it hundreds of times.

> ## "YOU DIDN'T FALL OUT OF BED WITH EXPERT WEB DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT SKILLS, AND THE SAME IS TRUE OF PEOPLE SKILLS"

So, how can you turn conflict into collaboration? The core skill you need to develop is listening. What is the other person afraid of? What's unknown to them? Web designers and UXers talk about having empathy for our users so we can understand what they need. To overcome conflict you need to have empathy for your clients and colleagues, which is more difficult because it's closer to home. In a conflict situation, you're likely to feel tense because you need control over your work, which will prevent you from listening with empathy. When people feel listened to, they calm down, and open up to listening to you.

Try the active listening technique where you listen, reflect what you heard the other person say and clarify your understanding.

WITHOUT JUDGEMENT

To prevent work frustration, you need appreciation for your contributions and respect for your value to the team. When your needs aren't met, you feel hurt and angry. As you try to deal with your anger, you'll find yourself judging others. You can spot this judgement by looking for language that implies that people are 'bad', or their choices are 'wrong', or they don't 'get it'. You may also notice self-judgement, where you tell yourself that you're wrong, or your work sucks, or that you somehow don't get it.

Before you can communicate without judgement you need to learn how to give yourself what you need. Your unmet needs are likely to be things like respect, appreciation, contribution and space (check out this ❯