0040 Not Designing Versus Designing Not To Design

The Summers Principle Book · https://kb.jeffreysummers.com/docs/0040-not-designing-versus-designing-not-to-design/

There is a distinction inside the principle that most operators miss on the first read, and that missing it produces a specific kind of failure — the operator who believes they are designing when they are actually defaulting, because they have confused two things that look similar from the outside but are opposite in cause.

Not designing is default. The operator did not engage the dimension. Never thought about it, never decided about it, never built a condition against it, never maintained anything on it. The dimension is producing outcomes by whatever forces happen to be present in the absence of the operator's intent.

Designing not to design is design. The operator engaged the dimension, decided that it should be left alone, built the condition of intentional looseness, and maintains that looseness. The dimension is producing outcomes by the operator's engineered intent — the intent being to leave space for spontaneity, improvisation, or emergence.

Externally, these two look identical. Both produce dimensions where the operator does not appear to be intervening. A cast member watching from the outside sees an operator who is not calling the shots on some specific dimension of the operation. They cannot tell whether the operator has chosen looseness or has never considered the dimension. Both look the same in the moment.

But they are opposite under the principle, and they produce opposite outcomes over time.

The operator who has designed not to design has consciously chosen the mode. They know what the dimension is. They have decided that engineered intent on this dimension would produce worse outcomes than intentional looseness — perhaps because the dimension benefits from cast improvisation, perhaps because Guest experience depends on spontaneity, perhaps because tight design would crush the specific quality the dimension is meant to produce. They have made a decision, built the condition that supports the looseness (the culture that permits it, the trust that enables it, the accountability structure that holds it in bounds), and they maintain those conditions actively. They will notice when the looseness starts producing bad outcomes, and they will tighten.

They will notice when the looseness is producing what they wanted, and they will hold. The looseness is a designed state.

The operator who is not designing on the dimension is running default. They have not decided to leave it alone. They have not decided anything. The dimension is invisible to them, or they have deferred engagement, or the design once ran and has decayed. Whatever is happening on the dimension is happening because the operator is not there. They will not notice when the outcomes turn. They will not know whether to tighten or hold. They have no read on whether the dimension is producing what they wanted, because they never decided what they wanted. The looseness is a defaulted state.

Same appearance. Opposite underlying cause. Opposite outcomes over time.

This distinction matters for a category of operators who resist the principle because they believe it demands tight control of every dimension of the operation. They value freedom, spontaneity, intuition, improvisation. They have seen operators who designed too tightly and crushed the life out of their restaurants. They fear that accepting the principle means becoming that kind of operator. They reject the principle on the grounds that some dimensions of a great restaurant should not be designed against.

The principle does not disagree. The principle says the operator must design or default on every dimension. It does not say design means tight control. Design means engineered intent. Engineered intent to leave a dimension loose is a valid form of design. What the principle rejects is the operator who claims to be leaving dimensions loose when they are actually defaulting on those dimensions unconsciously.

The test is simple. Can the operator state, clearly and specifically, why this dimension is intentionally loose? Can they describe the conditions they have built to support the looseness? Can they name what would cause them to tighten? If yes, they are designing not to design, and the principle is running on their side. If no, they are not designing — they are defaulting, and calling it freedom.

This is not a semantic move. The two operators produce different outcomes. The one who designs not to design maintains the conditions of positive looseness — the culture stays adaptive, the improvisation stays high-quality, the spontaneity stays connected to standards. The one who is not designing sees the same conditions decay over time — the culture drifts toward the lowest common denominator, the improvisation becomes sloppiness, the spontaneity becomes unpredictability without direction.

Real restaurants that appear to run on freedom and intuition are almost always running on very high-quality design not to design. The operator has thought deeply about what the loose dimensions should be, why they should be loose, what boundaries hold them, what would cause them to tighten. The looseness is a designed state, held actively. The freedom is engineered.

The restaurants that fail while claiming to run on freedom and intuition are running on default. The operator has never thought about the dimensions. The intuition is unconsidered. The freedom is undirected. And the outcomes reflect the absence of engineered intent — not the presence of a chosen looseness.

The principle asks the operator to be honest about which mode they are running. Not to force everything into tight design — that produces its own failure mode. But to know, on every dimension, whether they have designed or defaulted, and to be able to say why. The operator who can say why is running the principle. The operator who cannot say why is being run by it.