

Meet Tebogo Chaka: Embodying design thinking

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If you've seen Tebogo Chaka conduct a design thinking training session, you'll want to know how she does it: How does she get complete strangers and serious, driven people - corporate executives, civil engineers, academics - to be at ease enough to share openly and to dance - in front of each other?



She'll be quick to tell you.

"I think it starts with you as a coach. You need to create that space where people feel comfortable enough to do the things that you want them to do. If I'm saying, OK, guys, I want you to be comfortable and dance, it means I must be comfortable and dance and lead the way as a coach."

This is something she brings into her life outside of design thinking, too, which you can experience right away in an interview with her. The purpose of our meeting was to speak about her work, but Tebogo takes the opportunity to remind you that first and foremost, she's human. In our case, she did this by bringing her smiling, waving 9-month-old daughter with her, who now and then would erupt with sounds of joy.

"Say hello!" Tebogo says. "Hello!"

It is a moment that breaks the boundaries of the video call, and brings us all near. Suddenly, it is not an interview; we are just three people, speaking.

During Foundation Programme sessions, Tebogo's methods of generating comfort are, of course, different. But it is evident that this is something she's become expert at, having to constantly renew and refresh a space in which it is OK to keep trying, even as circumstances change.

(For example: Can we continue the conversation while she is bottle-feeding her daughter? Yes, seamlessly. Can her daughter sleep while we are speaking? Are we not being too loud? "I have a trick," Tebogo says. She straps her daughter to her back. "Look," she says, not five minutes later, swivelling the camera to her child's sleeping face.)

About design thinking itself, Tebogo continues to speak with joy.



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Some years ago, she coached a group of Foundation Programme students through the creation of a solution to a problem a project partner was experiencing. The solution that the team came up with – generating income by monetising digital content – was so impressive that the project partner chose to implement it. However, as things sometimes go, the implementation did not occur in the end. Although this was disappointing, Tebogo still finds immense value in the experience, and it remains one of her highlights as a coach.

“The team was very into it,” she says. “They were very into the process – they wanted to learn, to come up with solutions. I was very blessed.”

She brims as she details how one of the members of the group, Reitumetse Kholumo, has gone on to use the design thinking methodology during the creation of her own business, Kwela Brews, which recently launched on 29 April. Reitumetse is a stellar example of the effort that design thinking can inspire – it can bring about real change. Bringing awareness to the local African tradition of homebrewing and empowering the women who do it participate in business are just two significant ways that Reitumetse effects real, positive change in our society.

It's this ability to inspire change, no matter how big or how small, that drives Tebogo as a coach. She notes that design thinking is not just about finding a solution to a problem – a significant part of the design thinking journey is about embodying the mindsets and principles that underpin it. Ultimately, the ideas of a bias to action, the ability and curiosity to navigate uncertainty, and the will to play with possibilities should become second-nature to the practitioner and a common language between the team.

“Just having participants take something from the session – just one thing, an activity, or a mindset that would make a difference to them when they go back into their own spaces – I think, for me, that is making the difference.”

You leave the conversation feeling like the generosity of Tebogo's spirit is so great that, no matter what you were speaking about, you were always speaking about exactly what design thinking is about in the end: humans.

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