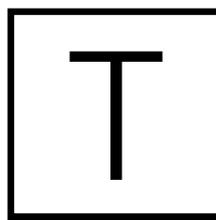


# The Leader as a Beacon

Lighting Designer  
Patricia Lopez Yanez  
shares some vital  
lessons that she has  
learnt across her  
career in her myriad  
roles as client, leader  
and creative director.



Traditional educational institutions prepare students to be design consultants, but not necessarily leaders. Leadership is something that is learnt with time, in practice and by working in the real world, however strong professional skills are of course always required, and act as a base for career growth. In

this article, I would like to share the main lessons learnt, reflections and experiences that have opened my eyes in my role as a client, leader and creative director, which can be a guide to other lighting designers to understand better the dynamics of the design and execution of a project.

Working as the Lighting Design Director for a real estate developer has given me a unique insight of the client's and project's requirements. Firstly, from this perspective, things are perceived very differently than from a consultant's point of view, as many additional factors and stakeholders need to be considered in the design process. I have understood the importance of surrounding myself with a team that I completely trust and that have faith in me as their leader. Finally, working in this role, my appreciation for the lighting design profession has greatly increased.

As part of my Programme for Leadership Development at Harvard Business School, I was recently given a case study called the "Leader as a Beacon". I was inspired as I found the title to be very poetic, and I immediately associated it with lighting. What I took from this case is that it is essential for all of us to acquire leadership skills, not necessarily to lead from the top, but from whatever our position in our company or our team is. A leader sees the panorama around them, sees the big picture, and with a clear vision, briefs, informs, influences, motivates and also protects the team. A leader must also be aware of the inner strengths of the company, be able to be very resourceful, at the same time keeping a team lean and agile.

My understanding of a client's role is now very different than before as I have realised that a client indeed has more power, but with that power comes both a great sense of responsibility and a lot of pressure. The role of a client is not easy, as they experience first hand the challenges of representing a company in constantly changing external conditions in terms of economy, market demand and design trends. Also, they need to work with the interior decisions and politics within the company as things can change very fast,



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Throughout her career, Lopez Yanez has had the responsibility of overseeing architectural projects both within the UAE and internationally, leading the lighting design conception, development and implementation across different types of projects, such as masterplanning, hospitality, residential and retail. Pictured are examples of her work on the Dubai Creek Harbour public realm (1), Dubai Creek Residences (2) and Flamingo Sanctuary artwork (3). (Pics: Ausra Osi)

after feedback given by upper management, the operator or end users, which then needs to be translated to the consultant team. Decisions need to be made quickly, sometimes instinctively, with not all the information that would be ideally required, as the financial consequences of a delayed decision can create a domino effect and negatively affect the programme and budget of the project. What has worked for me has been the implementation of lighting design guidelines to convey the vision, preferences and lessons learnt from the company, and which give consultants a better picture of the expectations. Also, always keeping an open and direct communication with everybody, to be able to convey the sometimes changing requirements of a project and be open to feedback. When directing a project, I learned that it is very important to think about the human factor, to be able to manage a diverse team inside the company and external consultants, contractors and end clients, and approach each one with their own language. The selection of the right team is key to the success of a project, in some cases, a small local consultant team will be enough and in other cases a firm with international expertise and bigger team will be required. Without a supporting design network and lighting community of manufacturers and suppliers, it would simply not be possible to execute a project. In summary, a leader needs to have a very clear vision, cannot work alone and needs to be humble to ask for support when needed.

In terms of the team and design process, radical ownership, a strong concept, quality and consistency in deliverables are essential. A lighting concept, as we were taught in school, is very important. However it should transcend purely abstract and aesthetic notions. It should be used to make consistent design choices throughout the process that will later be translated into a cohesive final product. From a practical view, from the perspective of the developer, and people who end up using the spaces, a strong concept will finally be translated into a compelling story that will be experienced by the people visiting or living in the spaces. One of my main lessons learnt is that common sense and simplicity almost always win. The spaces are usually not there to be admired, but to be lived in and experienced by people. A highly sophisticated design with state of the art technology, but that cannot be figured out or enjoyed by the end user is not ideal. It is only by true teamwork, considering all the people involved and dimensions of a project, that success will be obtained.

Finally, lighting designers are such key players in the design and success of a project. I remember when I started in my career, the lighting designer was barely given a place in meetings and our reports were sometimes added as an appendix. Nowadays our role has completely changed, some real estate developers and multinational design firms have realised the importance of having this expertise, sometimes in-house.

A lighting designer's role is also very complex, as we must be very well aware of the architectural design, client's guidelines, restrictions given by the MEP and project's budget. The lighting designer is responsible for how the project is perceived at night and throughout the day in areas where there is no natural daylight, which is so important. We all know how a slight change in intensity or colour temperature of a light source can take a space from uninviting and intimidating to an attractive space where people want to gather. We also know the responsibility that we have when coordinating all the information from other disciplines.

Quality control is very important, as each light point and product proposed has an impact in coordination with other services, in the overall project's programme and in the budget. In addition to the technical responsibility, a designer should also have empathy, be able to think in terms of the end user and not be scared to simplify; be very practical and intuitive.

Besides design knowledge, it is very important for the designer to understand the psychology of the client. Be bold and confident to propose a solution if the client does not have a clear brief in mind or simply is not able to convey exactly what is wanted, have enough confidence to show flexibility to accommodate the client's requirements, and be open to feedback. It is so refreshing to be presented a concept that shows initiative, that exceeds the client expectations, transcending the initial brief.

The main message I would like to leave us all to think about is the importance of deeply understanding the client's project vision and brief, the significance of a strong design narrative and the confidence and ease that the ownership of a project from the designer's part gives a client. At the same time not forgetting the value of common sense, simplicity and practicality in design. ■

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