



THE CEILING DIAGNOSTIC

Three different ceilings produce the same feeling: stuck.

Before anything gets fixed, the constraint has to be named correctly. Most practitioners arrive with a diagnosis already made. It is usually wrong in a specific and useful way.

WHY THIS COMES FIRST

Practitioners describe the ceiling in the language of exclusion: they do not value design, the stakeholder did not get it, I was not in the room. That description is accurate about the feeling and useless as a starting point, because it puts the cause somewhere you cannot reach.

Reclassifying the same events usually moves them. What felt like being overruled turns out to be a translation failure, where a sound argument was made in design terms to an audience that allocates authority in business terms. Or a leverage failure, where the input was right and arrived after the decision had already hardened. Both are addressable. "They do not value design" is not.

THE THREE CEILINGS

STRUCTURAL

The ladder does not exist

The organization has no defined path that recognizes design-specific value. Better work alone will not solve a rung that was never built.

TRANSLATION

The right argument, in the wrong language

The work is sound. Its commercial, operational, or risk consequence is not expressed in the language used to allocate attention and budget. The most common of the three.

LEVERAGE

Access without authority

You are in the room. The decision was shaped before you arrived. A sequencing and sponsorship problem, not a persuasion problem.

HOW TO COMPLETE IT

1. Answer the nine checks on the next three pages. Three per ceiling. Answer from memory, before rereading the definitions above.
2. Write one specific instance as evidence for every check marked true. A check without evidence is a feeling, not a finding.
3. Describe two moments on page five, then classify them. Describe first. Classify second.
4. Tally on page six and write your own diagnosis in one sentence.

NOTE One honest entry is worth more than three tidy ones. If a check is true and the reason is that the work itself was not good enough, write that down. The point of the exercise is an accurate baseline, not a flattering one.



CHECKS 1 TO 3 · STRUCTURAL

Does a path exist above you at all?

Answer from memory. The evidence lines matter more than the boxes: a check you cannot evidence is a check that will not survive a conversation with your manager.

CHECK 1 OF 9 · STRUCTURAL

There is no written, credible path from my current title to the next one.

A ladder you cannot describe is a ladder that does not exist for you. Verbal assurance from a manager is not a path.

☐ True for me ☐ Not true for me

EVIDENCE. ONE SPECIFIC INSTANCE, LAST TWELVE MONTHS.

CHECK 2 OF 9 · STRUCTURAL

No defined senior role in my organization owns design-level decisions.

If no seat exists above yours with that authority, better arguments have nowhere to land.

☐ True for me ☐ Not true for me

EVIDENCE. ONE SPECIFIC INSTANCE, LAST TWELVE MONTHS.

CHECK 3 OF 9 · STRUCTURAL

The people promoted above me are rewarded for output volume, not design judgment.

Promotion criteria reveal what an organization actually values. Read the criteria, not the values statement.

☐ True for me ☐ Not true for me

EVIDENCE. ONE SPECIFIC INSTANCE, LAST TWELVE MONTHS.



CHECKS 4 TO 6 · TRANSLATION

Is the work being argued in the language of the room?

This is the most common dominant ceiling and the most addressable. Be precise about what was said, not what was meant.

CHECK 4 OF 9 · TRANSLATION

When leadership asks what my work is worth in revenue, cost, or risk terms, I do not have the number ready.

Not having it is common. It is also the specific reason the case loses to a case that has one.

☐ True for me ☐ Not true for me

EVIDENCE. ONE SPECIFIC INSTANCE, LAST TWELVE MONTHS.

CHECK 5 OF 9 · TRANSLATION

My strongest work gets presented as screens and flows, not as business consequences.

The artifact is the evidence, not the argument. A room deciding on money hears the argument.

☐ True for me ☐ Not true for me

EVIDENCE. ONE SPECIFIC INSTANCE, LAST TWELVE MONTHS.

CHECK 6 OF 9 · TRANSLATION

Budget conversations about my area happen without my framing in the room.

If the framing arrives after the number is set, the number was set by someone else's framing.

☐ True for me ☐ Not true for me

EVIDENCE. ONE SPECIFIC INSTANCE, LAST TWELVE MONTHS.



CHECKS 7 TO 9 · LEVERAGE

Does access convert into authority?

Access is easy to mistake for influence. The evidence line is the test: name a decision that moved because you were there.

CHECK 7 OF 9 · LEVERAGE

I am invited to senior meetings after the real decision has already been shaped.

Presence is not participation. The meeting is often the ratification, not the decision.

☐ True for me ☐ Not true for me

EVIDENCE. ONE SPECIFIC INSTANCE, LAST TWELVE MONTHS.

CHECK 8 OF 9 · LEVERAGE

My recommendations need a sponsor to carry them. On their own, they stall.

Borrowed authority is still authority. The question is whether any of it is yours yet.

☐ True for me ☐ Not true for me

EVIDENCE. ONE SPECIFIC INSTANCE, LAST TWELVE MONTHS.

CHECK 9 OF 9 · LEVERAGE

I have been told I am trusted, but I cannot point to a decision I changed this quarter.

Trust that never converts into a changed outcome is goodwill, not leverage.

☐ True for me ☐ Not true for me

EVIDENCE. ONE SPECIFIC INSTANCE, LAST TWELVE MONTHS.



THE EVIDENCE

Describe it first. Classify it second.

Choose two moments from the last twelve months where your point of view was overridden or ignored. Pick the ones that still bother you. Fill the first two columns before you reread the definitions. The assumption column is data. Do not clean it up.

MOMENT 1 OF 2

What happened	What I assumed the issue was	What it actually was
Facts only. Who was in the room, what you presented, what was decided.	Your read at the time, in your own words.	Structural, translation, or leverage. Evidence for the call.

MOMENT 2 OF 2

What happened	What I assumed the issue was	What it actually was
Facts only. Who was in the room, what you presented, what was decided.	Your read at the time, in your own words.	Structural, translation, or leverage. Evidence for the call.



THE VERDICT

Three checks make a signal. Nine make a pattern.

Complete this after the checks and the moments, not before. Count your true answers per ceiling, then read what the distribution implies.

STRUCTURAL	Checks 1 to 3	_____
TRANSLATION	Checks 4 to 6	_____
LEVERAGE	Checks 7 to 9	_____

WHAT THE DISTRIBUTION IMPLIES

Dominant ceiling	What it implies
Structural	The constraint is the organization, not the work. Effort spent improving craft or framing will not move a rung that does not exist. The real questions are whether the ladder can be built and whether you are willing to wait while it is.
Translation	The most common result and the most addressable. The work is landing in the wrong language. The next move is installing the vocabulary that converts design decisions into revenue, cost, and risk terms.
Leverage	The argument is not the problem. When and to whom it arrives is. The next move is sequencing: pre-wiring stakeholders and building credibility before the decision hardens, not after.

THE ONE SENTENCE

Write your own diagnosis in a single sentence. Not what happened. What keeps happening.

LIMIT This worksheet diagnoses your pattern. It does not diagnose your employer. Some environments cap designers structurally whatever the individual does, and establishing which one you are in requires the firm's promotion and compensation data, not this page.



THE NEXT MOVE

A diagnosis is useful only if it changes the next conversation.

You now have a dominant ceiling and evidence for it. That is the input. What follows is the decision it feeds.

What you are not asked to decide yet. Whether to stay, push, or leave. That question comes after the translation layer is installed and your firm's promotion and compensation structure is on the table. Deciding it now would be deciding it on feeling.

THE QUESTION TO BRING INTO THE CONVERSATION

Written from your verdict, not from your frustration. One question, answerable by someone other than you.

A 20-MINUTE CAREER ADVISORY FIT CALL

Bring one real situation and your verdict. Leave with a direct view on what to do about it.

No pitch, twenty minutes. If the work I do is not the right fit for your ceiling, I will say so and point you somewhere better. Book at cal.com/digitalventuresx/20min, or read more at digitalventuresx.com.

WHO BUILT THIS

Rod Smith has spent 10+ years leading product and design work across corporate, consulting, and high-stakes operating environments. Currently Chief Product Officer at an AI startup, previously co-led the UX Center of Excellence at a Kearney company. Collaborated with product and design leadership teams for State Street, Fidelity, Charles Schwab, T-Mobile, Johnson & Johnson, and PepsiCo.

PASS IT ON Know someone working hard on the wrong ceiling? Send them this worksheet. It is free, and it is the same one used inside the advisory work. digitalventuresx.com/the-ceiling-diagnostic

LIMIT The Ceiling Diagnostic is an advisory tool. It does not guarantee a promotion, title change, or internal opportunity.