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Research Article

The Application of Fayol's Principles of Management in Design Studio Practices

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ABSTRACT

This research article examines how Henri Fayol's classical principles of management (planning, organising, commanding, coordinating, and controlling, along with fourteen supporting principles) manifest in contemporary design studio practices. While Fayol's framework was developed for industrial organisations in the early 20th century, its conceptual clarity and managerial focus have made it a durable lens for analysing varied organisational forms. Using a qualitative multiple-case study of three medium-sized architecture and product-design studios, this study draws on semi-structured interviews (n = 18), participant observation (120 hours), and document analysis to explore how studio leaders interpret and adapt Fayolian principles within creative, project-based workflows. Theoretical framing combines Fayolian classical management with theories of design cognition and organisational culture, and analysis is guided by reflexive thematic analysis. Findings indicate that Fayol's principles are present but heavily reinterpreted to protect creative autonomy; explicit application occurs most readily in planning, coordination, and control of resources, while command and rigid unity-of-command are softened through collaborative leadership; certain Fayolian principles (e.g., esprit de corps, initiative) align strongly with fostering creative climate and are purposefully cultivated; and tensions arise between efficiency-driven controls and the emergent, iterative character of design work. The article concludes with practical recommendations for studio managers aiming to balance managerial rigour with creative freedom, and it proposes an updated "Studio-Fayol" model that retains Fayol's managerial core while embedding design-sensitive adaptations.

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1. Introduction

Design studios—whether architecture, graphic design, industrial design, or multimedia—operate at the intersection of creativity and project delivery. They must produce novel, context-sensitive design solutions while meeting client expectations, budgets, and timelines. This dual imperative poses a classic managerial challenge: how to organise, coordinate, and control work without stifling the creative processes that generate value (Amabile, 1996; Cross, 2006).

Henri Fayol's principles of management, first articulated in the early 20th century, foreground functions (planning, organising, commanding, coordinating, controlling) and complementary principles (e.g., unity of command, scalar chain, esprit de corps) intended to improve organisational efficiency and managerial effectiveness (Fayol, 1949/1916). Though originating in industrial contexts, Fayol's framework provides a structured language for understanding managerial activity across sectors. The research question guiding this study is:

> How are Fayol's principles of management understood, adapted, and applied in contemporary design studio practices?

This article contributes to managerial and design-studies literature by empirically exploring the translation of classical management ideas into creative, project-based environments. It bridges management theory and design theory—bringing Fayol into conversation with scholarship on design cognition and studio pedagogy (Schön, 1983; Lawson, 2006; Cross, 2006). The study uses a qualitative multiple-case approach to provide rich, contextualised accounts of managerial practice in three studios and offers recommendations for managers seeking to maintain both creativity and operational clarity.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Fayol's Principles and Their Contemporary Relevance

Henri Fayol (1841–1925) proposed a general theory of administration that emphasised managerial functions and principles applicable across organisational contexts (Fayol, 1949/1916). Fayol identified five primary managerial functions—planning, organising, commanding, coordinating, and controlling—and fourteen principles such as division of work, authority and responsibility, unity of command, and esprit de corps (Fayol, 1949/1916). Subsequent management scholars have critiqued Fayol for its prescriptive, mechanistic leanings (Taylorist influences) but have also acknowledged its enduring analytical utility (Mintzberg, 1973; Drucker, 1999).

Contemporary organisations have adapted Fayolian concepts to new contexts. For example, Mintzberg (1973) reimagined managerial roles as interrelated behavioural sets rather than prescriptive functions, while scholars have extended Fayol's ideas into strategic and knowledge-based domains (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Drucker, 1999). In creative industries, classical management principles are often selectively applied—

used for resource allocation and scheduling while being softened to accommodate collaborative and iterative practices (Florida, 2002; Amabile, 1996).

2.2. Management in Creative and Design Contexts

Creative work has distinct characteristics: ambiguity, iterative problem framing, tacit knowledge exchange, and high task interdependence (Amabile, 1996; Schön, 1983). Design studios historically foster apprenticeship models and studio critiques—pedagogical and organisational practices that enable knowledge exchange and reflective practice (Schön, 1983; Cross, 2006). Management research in creative contexts highlights the need for leadership that enables autonomy, cultivates a creative climate, and mediates client relationships (Coleman & Robison, 2010; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006).

Organisational culture plays a central role in creative production. Schein's (2010) model of organisational culture—artefacts, espoused values, underlying assumptions—helps explain how studios codify norms such as critique rituals, collaborative conventions, and work rhythms. Design managers must balance structure (processes, budgets, milestones) with culture (trust, experimentation), a duality that scholars have described as "loose–tight" management (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004).

2.3. Gaps in the Literature

Despite research on leadership and creativity, less empirical attention has been paid to how classical management principles are pragmatically adapted in studios. Existing studies tend to focus on leadership styles (transformational, servant) or innovation processes (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) rather than on explicit translation of comprehensive managerial frameworks like Fayol's. This study aims to close that gap by mapping Fayolian concepts onto studio practices and analysing tensions and synergies.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study situates Fayol's classical management principles within a design-sensitive theoretical framework that integrates:

Fayol's Administrative Theory (Fayol, 1949/1916): Provides the primary analytical lens—functions and principles are used as interpretive categories when examining managerial practices.

Design Cognition and Reflective Practice (Schön, 1983; Cross, 2006; Lawson, 2006): These theories foreground the iterative, reflective nature of design work—how designers frame problems, sketch solutions, and refine ideas through critique and testing. They help explain why certain Fayolian principles require adaptation.

Organisational Culture and Leadership Theory (Schein, 2010; Amabile, 1996; Mintzberg, 1973): These perspectives account for the social and cultural dynamics within studios—how norms, rituals, and leadership behaviours support creativity.

Integrating these perspectives allows for a dual analysis: (a) assessing the presence and explicit adaptation of Fayolian principles in

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studio operations, and (b) interpreting those adaptations through the lens of design cognition and culture—why managers adapt, what tensions arise, and how creative outcomes are affected.

A conceptual model (Figure 1) is proposed: the Studio-Fayol Model, which positions Fayol's core functions at the centre (planning, organising, commanding, coordinating, controlling) and overlays design-sensitive adaptations—distributed leadership, iterative planning, critique-based coordination, and culture-driven control mechanisms (e.g., peer review rather than top-down command). (Note: Figure 1 is described here for conceptual clarity; a visual schematic can be produced upon request.)

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Design

A qualitative multiple-case study design was selected to allow in-depth exploration of managerial practices within real-world studio contexts (Yin, 2014). Case studies are particularly suited for studying complex phenomena where context matters—the interaction of managerial principles and creative processes is such a phenomenon.

4.2. Case Selection

Three design studios were purposefully sampled to provide variation in discipline and managerial structure:

- Studio A: A medium-sized architecture studio (25 employees) focused on residential and small commercial projects.

- Studio B: A product-design studio (12 employees) working on industrial design and consumer products.
- Studio C: A multidisciplinary design studio (18 employees) offering branding, UX, and spatial design.

Studios were selected based on willingness to participate, diversity of projects, and managerial models (traditional hierarchical, hybrid, and flat/distributed).

4.3. Data Collection

Data collection combined semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis over six months.

Interviews: Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with studio principals (n = 3), project leaders/senior designers (n = 7), and junior designers/assistants (n = 8). Each interview lasted 45–90 minutes and followed an interview guide probing management practices, decision-making, planning, coordination, authority dynamics, and perceptions of creative climate.

Participant Observation: The researcher conducted approximately 120 hours of observation across the three studios, attending design critiques, project meetings, client meetings, and day-to-day work settings. Field notes captured interactions, rituals, and managerial interventions.

Document Analysis: Studio documents (project schedules, role descriptions, workflow charts, and internal guidelines) were analysed to triangulate interview and observation data.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and participants gave informed consent; pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality.

4.4. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis steps included:

- Familiarisation: Transcription and close reading of interview transcripts and field notes.
- Coding: Generating initial codes using both deductive codes derived from Fayol's principles (e.g., planning, unity of command, esprit de corps) and inductive codes that emerged from the data (e.g., "critique as control," "distributed authority").
- Theme Development: Collating codes into candidate themes that reflected patterns across cases.
- Refinement: Iterative review and refinement of themes against the dataset and theoretical framework.
- Interpretation: Mapping themes to Fayolian concepts and design-theory constructs to interpret meaning and implications.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation (interviews, observation, documents), member checking (participants reviewed summaries), and reflective memoing to account for the researcher's positionality.

5. Findings

Five interrelated themes emerged from the analysis, each illustrating how Fayol's principles are present, reinterpreted, and negotiated in studio practice.

5.1. Planned Iteration: Reframing Fayolian Planning for Design

Fayol's principle: Planning (forecasting and preparation) is essential for managerial effectiveness.

Studio manifestation: All three studios practised planning, but planning was iterative and design-led rather than linear. Studio A and B used project milestones, Gantt-like schedules, and resource allocation matrices. However, planners explicitly built "design iteration buffers"—time allocated for exploratory phases and unexpected client-driven changes. Principals described planning as a living document:

> *"We plan with an expectation of the unexpected. Schedules are scaffolds, not cages." (Studio A principal)*

Thus, Fayol's planning was localised—managers balanced the need for predictability with acknowledgement that design discovery often shifts scope. Planning also included scenario-based contingencies and design checkpoints (concept freeze, detailed design, delivery), which allowed formal control points without constraining ideation.

5.2. Organising for Cross-Functional Collaboration

Fayol's principle: Organising (structuring resources and activities) emphasises division of work and clear responsibilities.

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Studio manifestation: Studios retained division of labour (roles: lead, junior, visualiser, modeller) but blurred functional boundaries through cross-functional pods. Studio C used project teams that combined UX designers, brand strategists, and spatial designers. Role fluidity was encouraged to support knowledge exchange and problem reframing. Organisational charts existed, but studios emphasised role flexibility:

> *"People have primary roles, but secondary hats are common. It's how we keep learning and remain nimble." (Studio C project lead)*

Fayol's division of work was thus adapted to balance specialisation and cross-disciplinary synthesis—important for tackling complex design problems.

5.3. From Command to Collaborative Leadership

Fayol's principle: Command (authority to give orders) and unity of command (one supervisor per subordinate) are central.

Studio manifestation: Command was the most contested Fayolian principle. All studios eschewed strict hierarchical command during creative phases. Instead, they practised collaborative leadership—project leads facilitated rather than commanded. Unity of command persisted in administrative matters (timesheets, client billing), but creative decisions were often negotiated in peer reviews and critiques. One principal noted:

> *"If I impose a design, it's not ours—it's mine. We can't have that. So I guide, we debate, and then we commit together." (Studio B principal)*

When conflict or decisional deadlocks occurred, principals exercised authoritative decision-making—this resembled a situational application of Fayol's command function rather than a strict, always-on command structure.

5.4. Coordination through Rituals and Artefacts

Fayol's principle: Coordinating aligns activities across the organisation to achieve unity of effort.

Studio manifestation: Coordination occurred via rituals (weekly critiques, daily stand-ups) and artefacts (shared whiteboards, project management tools). Critiques functioned as integrative moments where design intent, client requirements, and technical constraints were aligned. Studios treated critiques as coordination mechanisms that simultaneously performed peer control and design refinement:

> *"Critique is where we synchronise thinking—it's our coordination meeting and quality check rolled into one." (Studio A senior designer)*

Digital tools (task boards, shared repositories) supported asynchronous coordination, but rituals anchored coordination in shared time and space—a hybrid of Fayolian coordination and design pedagogy.

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5.5. Control as Enabling rather than Policing

Fayol's principle: Controlling ensures activities align with plans and standards.

Studio manifestation: Control mechanisms included budgets, milestone reviews, and quality assurance processes. However, control was framed as enabling—preventing rework and safeguarding creative energy—rather than policing. For example, Studio B used peer review checklists focused on constructively identifying technical risks and user-experience mismatches. Financial controls (cost tracking) were strict, reflecting market realities, but design reviews were positively oriented:

> *"Controls keep the lights on. They don't tell us what to design, but they help us design within reality." (Studio B project lead)*

Esprit de corps was actively cultivated through rituals (Friday demos, team lunches) and by celebrating completed projects— Fayol's social-emotional principles were deliberately used to maintain morale and creative cohesion.

6. Discussion

6.1. Interpreting Findings with the Studio-Fayol Model

The findings suggest that Fayol's managerial functions remain relevant but require translation when applied to design studios. Figure 2 (conceptual) maps the adaptations: planning becomes iterative planning; organising becomes flexible specialisation;

commanding becomes collaborative/semi-authoritative leadership; coordinating becomes ritualised and artefact-enabled synchronisation; controlling becomes enabling control.

This mapping echoes Mintzberg's (1973) critique that management is less about rigid functions and more about roles and situational judgment; yet it also affirms Fayol's enduring heuristic value as a way to systematically consider managerial responsibilities. In studios, Fayolian principles are used instrumentally— managers consciously retain the elements that support delivery (planning, resource control) while modifying relational and authority principles to sustain creativity.

6.2. Tensions Between Efficiency and Creative Autonomy

A core tension identified is between efficiency-driven controls (timelines, budgets) and the emergent, exploratory nature of design. Studios employ buffers and contingency strategies to reconcile these tensions, but trade-offs remain. When commercial pressure mounts, studios may narrow iterative latitude, potentially compromising exploratory depth. This dynamic supports Amabile's (1996) findings that external constraints affect creativity positively or negatively depending on their framing—controls can enable creative problem solving when framed as constraints to design against (e.g., material limits), but they can stifle ideation when they are overly prescriptive.

6.3. Leadership: From Command to Stewardship

The data reveal a shift from Fayol's top-down command toward stewardship—a leadership mode that protects creative spaces, mediates client relationships, and intervenes decisively when required. This aligns with research on creative leadership, which emphasises facilitation, inspiration, and boundary management (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006). Unity of command survives as administrative clarity but is relaxed in creative decision-making to allow multi-voiced critique and co-authorship of design outcomes.

6.4. Cultural Mechanisms as Managerial Tools

Schein's (2010) cultural lens helps explain why rituals and artefacts (critiques, demos, shared workspaces) become effective coordination and control mechanisms. Rather than being mere traditions, these cultural tools operationalise Fayol's coordinating and controlling functions in ways compatible with reflective design practice (Schön, 1983). Esprit de corps—a humanistic Fayolian principle—finds renewed relevance as studios explicitly cultivate psychological safety, trust, and mutual respect to enable risk-taking.

6.5. Implications for Theory and Practice

Theoretically, this study suggests that classical management frameworks remain analytically potent when combined with discipline-specific theories—here, design cognition and organisational culture.

Practically, the study offers guidance for studio managers: use Fayolian functions as a checklist rather than a blueprint; embed iteration into planning; foster role flexibility within a clear administrative backbone; institutionalise coordination rituals; and reframe control as enabling.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1. Conclusion

Fayol's principles of management continue to offer valuable conceptual tools for understanding and improving design studio practices. However, studios do not apply these principles mechanically. Instead, they reinterpret and adapt Fayol's ideas to reconcile the demands of creativity with the requirements of project delivery. Key adaptations include iterative planning, flexible organising, collaborative leadership, ritualised coordination, and enabling controls. These adaptations preserve managerial effectiveness while protecting the studio's creative core.

7.2. Practical Recommendations

Based on empirical findings, the following recommendations are offered for studio managers:

- Adopt Iterative Planning Frameworks: Build formal milestones that include iteration buffers and explicit checkpoints for creative divergence and customer validation.
- Design Flexible Role Structures: Maintain clear primary

responsibilities but enable secondary roles and cross-disciplinary pods to foster knowledge exchange.

- Practice Collaborative Leadership: Facilitate creative dialogue and reserve authoritative decisions for conflict resolution or external exigencies.
- Institutionalise Coordination Rituals: Use critiques, demos, and stand-ups as integrative moments that combine coordination with quality assurance.
- Frame Controls as Enablers: Reframe financial and technical controls as tools that protect creative capacity rather than constrain it—use peer-review mechanisms to embed control within the design culture.
- Cultivate Esprit de Corps: Invest in rituals and recognition practices that sustain morale, psychological safety, and team cohesion.

7.3. Limitations and Future Research

Limitations include a small, purposive sample and contexts limited to medium-sized studios—findings may differ for very large firms or micro-studios. Future research could compare Fayolian adaptations across studio scales, cultural contexts, and disciplines, use longitudinal designs to track managerial evolution, or quantitatively examine the relationship between specific managerial adaptations and creative outcomes.

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