



TAMING THE CHAOS OF AGENCY LIFE



18 Creative Directors from Top Agencies Share Their Secrets

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INTRODUCTION

Agency life can be chaotic. Whether it's dealing with diva clients who change their minds every 10 minutes, trying to get the creative team (or anyone, for that matter) to actually track their time, or making any attempt at advance planning, resource planning, or prioritizing, the nature of agency work—especially in an agency centered around creative—is one of change. Agencies have to be agile, but they must also try to find some sort of structure and process to balance things out. And most of all, they have to please their clients and deliver work on time, on budget, and looking exactly as the client pictured it.

All of this proves challenging for most agencies. So, Mighty Guides and Workfront have teamed up to gather best practices and ideas from 18 creative directors at agencies around the world, such as BBDO, Saatchi & Saatchi, TBWA Chiat, and Young & Rubicam, in response to this question:

**“ We all know how chaotic agency life can be:
What are some of the tips and tricks or best practices you
use to stay creative and competitive amidst all the chaos? ”**

Read through this e-book to get ideas from your agency colleagues on how to make agency work more manageable and enjoyable.

SOMETIMES, THE RIGHT ANSWER IS “NO”



KASSIE NAIDOO

Design Director/Creative Director, Y&R South Africa

As a woman of color in South Africa, entering the creative industry in the dying days of apartheid for Kassie Naidoo was exhilarating. She was welcomed into magazine publishing at the progressive Afrikaans magazine *De Kat*. Loving magazine design and art direction, she worked on men's travel and leisure, fashion, and décor titles as well as a breakthrough post-apartheid black youth music, street, and culture magazine. In 2000, she made the switch to design and advertising. Her portfolio includes brand development and design, corporate identity, and TV and in-store campaigns for food, retail, cars, fashion, and government.



Website

Advertising is a high-pressure, deadline-driven industry in which people must perform at a consistently high level. Most people find it chaotic and stressful, with overwhelming workloads, constant last-second demands, and frequently shifting priorities. In food retail—things are even worse. Retail clients want new products churned out daily as they react to changing price points, competitive challenges, special promotions, and product launches. The creative agency must react quickly, across platforms, to a constantly changing retail landscape. That produces even more chaos.

Fortunately, I've found that when my team members lose their heads, I have a calming influence. I've found ways to balance the two hemispheres of my brain enough to meander through the chaos and get to some effective outcomes.

Of course, it's an advantage that I have had to work at, as well. Here are a few insights that have helped me keep things in perspective:

- **Creativity ≠ Freedom.** We like to think that creativity requires complete freedom. I disagree. My best creativity comes out of some form of imposed order. Even restrictions—tight deadlines, challenging budgets—seem to work in my favor. I'm often at my best when I have to push through a looming deadline. Without that, I tend to wander. Experience makes a difference, of course—solutions come more easily and quickly to me than they might to a younger, less experienced creative—but I thrive under pressure.

KEY LESSONS

- 1 CREATIVITY DOESN'T ALWAYS REQUIRE UNLIMITED FREEDOM. SOMETIMES, PRESSURE HELPS YOU PRODUCE YOUR BEST WORK.
- 2 WHEN YOU GET EMERGENCY REQUESTS OR DEADLINE DEMANDS THAT ARE RIDICULOUS, YOU CAN DECLINE.



SOMETIMES, THE RIGHT ANSWER IS “NO”

- **Infrastructure Matters.** Working with a supportive team is important. In my agency, we have a great production and operations management system in place. That, to me, is vital to a smoothly running agency. Production and operations managers are like traffic cops, keeping the client service people at bay and protecting the creatives. They act as gatekeepers, preventing some of the chaos from getting through to the creatives. Without that kind of supportive structure in place, chaos can become destructive.
- **Just Say No.** Believe me: it's okay to say no when you're being pressed to produce something you know needs more finessing and crafting. When you get emergency requests or ridiculous deadlines, you can decline. When agreeing to such demands would mean creating a debilitating space, I have learned to push back and say, "Absolutely not." Fortunately, my agency supports that—within reason, of course. We have this informal operating principle at Y&R: "It takes as long as it takes to bake the cake." It's important to be able to stand up for something that you really believe in.

You may wonder how someone who's so willing to turn the client down still has a career. Perhaps it's a matter of how you say something rather than what you say. You won't always get your way in terms of convincing a client, but it's important that you try, because at the end of the day, whatever goes out to the public space under your agency's name is an indication of what you as a creative director have allowed to go out. It reflects not only on the brand you're working with but also on you as a person or us as the agency behind that product. Our work is a demonstration for future clients and future relationships with future brands. You have to put your best foot forward.

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Production and operations managers are like traffic cops, keeping the client service people at bay and protecting the creatives.
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PRETEND TO BE CALM



**FEDERICO
FANTI**

Associate Creative Director,
Young & Rubicam Moscow

Federico Fanti is an associate creative director at Young & Rubicam Moscow. He has been in the communication business for more than 15 years and worked for some of the biggest networks (McCann-Erickson, Young & Rubicam). He was lucky enough to receive some cool awards as well, including Cannes, D&AD, Epica, London International Award, and the Italian Art Directors Club.



Website

Creative people live in chaos, because the creative mind is full of chaos.

Creativity is about freedom, but freedom cannot be unlimited or unrestrained. It must be tempered with discipline. That's an issue I have to face every day as a creative director.

Years ago, when I was in Italy working as an art director, I could give myself much more latitude to be chaotic and free. Now, however, I have advanced to a new role as manager, and now I know that chaos can become unhealthy.

You need to live with people. You need to organize the workload. You need to face different tasks simultaneously. I found I needed to learn some tricks to help me avoid chaos for myself and my entire

22-member creative team. Here is what I have discovered:

- Give the creative team ownership of the project.
- Give them simple and clear tasks.
- Try to educate clients involving them in the creative process.

Small companies tend to be less experienced with marketing campaigns and so trust the agency implicitly, more so than big corporations. That only means you have to work harder to engage your mega-clients.

“ Creative people live in chaos, because the creative mind is full of chaos. ”

KEY LESSONS

- 1 GIVE YOUR CREATIVE TEAM OWNERSHIP OF THE PROJECT AND SIMPLE, CLEAR TASKS.**
- 2 WHEREVER POSSIBLE, INVOLVE YOUR CLIENT IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS.**



PRETEND TO BE CALM

Once I had a science-oriented client that was preparing a product launch. The brief the client shared with us was immense, dense, and complicated. Just reading it took almost two days. The TV campaign was scheduled for four months, from brief to execution. It was a nightmare from the start because the client brief was barely understandable. We wasted a lot of time distilling it down to a creative brief that we could work from.

After a lot of little struggles with the client, they eventually approved our creative brief. Then, the client changed its mind—in the middle of shooting! The client somehow decided it had aimed its product at the wrong demographic. It needed to change messaging for another audience—in mid-shoot. We scrambled to re-concept a new script on the fly, using the same location, actors, and props. It was approved. We finally delivered a product that the client liked.

I believe we overcame this crazy situation because all my team was united by a common passion. With that, you can achieve everything. As team leader, you need to take control and be patient—with your team, your client, everybody around you. Lose your temper, and you show yourself a weak person.

Weakness is not inspiring. People who work with an inspired boss can deliver beautiful work. That's my personal experience, which leads to my final piece of advice.

Be calm, or at least pretend to be calm. Yes, it is really difficult sometimes, but if you can master your most powerful emotions, I believe you will achieve whatever you want.

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Lose your temper, and you show yourself a weak person. Weakness is not inspiring.

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BE FLEXIBLE, POSITIVE, AND FOCUSED ON OBJECTIVES



**BRIAN
RIEMER**

VP, Creative Director,
Saatchi & Saatchi

Brian Riemer started his career as a simple copywriter who wrote the first-ever Jose Cuervo website. Now, he's an even simpler creative director who believes that ROI should stand for *return on involvement*. He loves the work. He loves brands. He loves strategy. He loves creativity. He loves results. Every day, he goes to the office and looks for another reason to fall in love.



Twitter

Some people thrive on chaos. I don't. Chaos is distracting, and it's not conducive to creating the best work. In my experience, chaos comes down from management; unfortunately, all too often dysfunction becomes the function. In many places, chaos has become the norm.

I have three strategies to managing chaos. First, it's essential that you have a process, but that process must be flexible because different projects have different constraints. Every project, no matter what it is or what schedule it has, must have the same milestones. These typically include a brief that everybody understands and approves. Everybody must be given direction and the proper time to do their work. Then their work must be reviewed internally, and then externally. It must be revised. Then, it goes around for final review and into production. Whether the project has a three-month turnaround or a three-day turnaround, these steps must take place. That means that the process must be flexible and compressible, like the bellows of an accordion. If it's a three-day project, all the normal milestones must happen quickly.

“ It's essential that you have a process, but that process must be flexible because different projects have different constraints. ”

KEY LESSONS

- 1** BE SURE TO CREATE A BRIEF THAT CONTAINS THE OBJECTIVES FOR THE PROJECT. NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS, ADHERE TO THOSE OBJECTIVES.
- 2** WHEN YOU'RE BRAINSTORMING, YOU DON'T EVER WANT TO SHUT IDEAS DOWN BEFORE THEY ARE FULLY EXPLORED.



BE FLEXIBLE, POSITIVE, AND FOCUSED ON OBJECTIVES

If a client asks for changes that threaten a schedule, then either the schedule gives or a project milestone is dropped; everyone must understand and be on board for that kind of change. So, having a predictable but flexible process is important.

Second, staying positive through the process is more productive than being negative. We all know the old saying about no bad ideas, but of course that's not really true. What is true when you're brainstorming is that you don't ever want to shut ideas down before they are fully explored. You want to make sure everything gets out. I approach it with the same philosophy as improvisational comedy. In improv, you don't say "no." Everyone builds on what someone else said, and it goes on like that until it reaches some logical end. Either the idea plays out to the point where it's obviously not working, or it builds into something really great.

Finally, it's particularly important to have a brief that spells out the project objectives. That brief becomes the governing document, the sacred text of the project. At the beginning, everyone agrees to key objectives in the brief, staying focused on those objectives even as the process expands or contracts—even in brainstorming sessions when people are developing ideas and deciding whether they're working. It doesn't matter if I or somebody on my team likes an idea. What matters is whether the idea works to accomplish the project objectives as laid out in the brief. When we stray from the brief, chaos ensues.

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KILLING THE CULTURE OF NICE



**HARRIS
WILKINSON**

Creative Director,
TBWA\CHIAT DAY\SAN

Harris Wilkinson started as a copywriter at DDB Chicago. A first movie script sale led him to Los Angeles, where he has continued to work in advertising while selling feature and drama pilots to studios and networks such as New Line, Lionsgate, Warner Brothers Television, FOX, NBC, and Universal Studios. Harris is currently a creative director, helping launch a new experiential division within TBWA\CHIAT DAY, and serves as a producer on Lifetime's *My Haunted House*.



Twitter | Website



I believe something like 90 percent of the chaos in a creative agency is created by the agency itself, and a good portion of that chaos is fear based. This business is filled with people who aren't confident in their own ideas. The fact is, rejection is part of the business, and that's okay. The question is how to make everyone comfortable with this.

The first step is relationships. If you have a strong bond with both your brands and your staff, rejection will no longer be seen as a personal attack, and will instead simply be about moving the business forward. The second part of this is focusing the work with fewer rounds of smarter work. There's no need to toil until you're out of time. You do it until you get it right.

To accomplish this, I have a philosophy of "killing the culture of nice." For instance, say a team creates four campaigns, and I absolutely know that two of them just don't work. In the culture of nice, you would give feedback and let the team continue to develop work you know is wrong because you hate to say no. This creates extra work for the staff, and ultimately diminishes their trust in you. To get past that, I make it a practice to kill bad ideas quickly. At one agency, we used a "crap stamp."

“ I make it a practice to kill bad ideas quickly. ”

KEY LESSONS

- 1 IF YOU HAVE A STRONG BOND AND BUILD TRUST WITH BOTH YOUR BRANDS AND YOUR STAFF, IT ELIMINATES A LOT OF THE CHAOS.**
- 2 THERE'S NO NEED TO WORK UNTIL YOU'RE OUT OF TIME. YOU WORK UNTIL YOU GET IT RIGHT. THE KEY IS GETTING IT RIGHT QUICKLY.**



KILLING THE CULTURE OF NICE

Everyone in the creative department would bring raw ideas to a brainstorm, and we would review everything as a team; anyone who didn't like something would give it the crap stamp—and a reason why. The crap stamp was democratic because everyone put ideas on the wall—including the Creative Directors—and everyone took turns shooting down some ideas, and helping build on others. You might think it would be horrible, but those meetings were tremendous fun. Most importantly, people learned not to be overly protective of their ideas, and also to curate them before coming into meetings.

Of course, the wrinkle in this is that some clients push for more rounds regardless of what they see early on. So, the agency throws straw dogs into the first presentation, which wastes everybody's time, in addition to undermining the agency-brand relationship. In cases like this, the training is external versus internal, because the fear is on the client side. If they don't see round after round, how can they be sure it's right?

At the agency where we used the crap stamp, our first round presentations became more and more focused, and slowly the client-side fear diminished, and their trust grew exponentially. By the end of my tenure at that agency, we had an 85 percent first-round acceptance rate. Talk about a reduction in chaos—we were much more deliberate about what we created, and the clients were much more receptive to what we presented.

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We would review everything as a team; anyone who didn't like something would give it the crap stamp—and a reason why.
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DON'T BE AFRAID OF CHAOS, EMBRACE IT



**MATT
FISCHVOGT**

Copywriter/Creative Director

Matt Fischvogt's work has been recognized by The Cannes Lions International Festival, The One Show, and Effies as well as such top industry publications as *Communication Arts*, *Advertising Age*, *The New York Times*, *Time Magazine*, *Fast Company*, *Business Week*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. He has worked with CP+B, Mullen and McKinney, but his proudest accomplishment is cutting patterns into the outfield of Camden Yards as a full-time member of the Baltimore Orioles grounds crew.

It's tough coming into an industry that thrives on chaos. The fact is, this is an industry that loves blowing stuff up, especially at the last minute. It has a lot to do with the creative personality and the fact that one of the characteristics of good creatives is never settling. There's always a better answer out there. Many creatives fail to reach their full potential because they stop working the problem too early. It can be frustrating to some, especially the night before a new business pitch when it's 2:00 in the morning and we say, "This isn't working. Let's take everything off the wall and start over."

Chaos is not a tool we roll out at certain points in the process just to blow everything up. It's the nature of any creative job in which people are trying to do something that hasn't been done before. There's no simple formula for accomplishing such a task, so some level of chaos is involved by definition. Of course, there are tools to help manage a process that feeds off of chaos, such as having a solid brief so that the team starts off in the right place and team members understand what they're talking about. Also, a certain amount of discipline can be incredibly valuable to creatives.

“ This is an industry that loves blowing stuff up, especially at the last minute. ”

KEY LESSONS

- 1 THE AGENCY SHOULD BE A PLACE WHERE FAILURE IS ACCEPTABLE AND ENCOURAGED. AS LONG AS IT'S A BEAUTIFUL FAILURE, THEN IT SHOULD BE ALL RIGHT.
- 2 IT'S THE [CREATIVES] WHO KEEP A SCHEDULE AND KNOW WHEN CHECK-INS ARE, WHO KNOW WHEN MIDPOINTS ARE, WHO KNOW WHEN THINGS ARE DUE, WHO ARE MOST SUCCESSFUL.



DON'T BE AFRAID OF CHAOS, EMBRACE IT

In ad school, I had a brilliant professor who was a juggernaut in the business. He said that in his experience, the most successful creatives he had known shared the ability to keep a schedule. A lot of junior creatives fall into the idea of chaos, thinking let's be disheveled and not know when things are happening, let's sit in a dark room until the ideas come. It's the ones who keep a schedule and know when check-ins are, who know when midpoints are, who know when things are due, who are most successful. It's a person who has done great work we all admire, and that person says, "Keep your life in order and get ahead of it, because if you don't, it will quickly get away from you."

It's also important to be open to ideas and not just say no to everything. This doesn't mean that creative directors or anybody leading a creative department is just going to say yes to everything. Make no mistake: an advertising agency is a meritocracy built around a dictator. That dictator can say no and will say no and should say no. But the agency should also be a place where failure is acceptable and encouraged. That way, you don't get people who are worried about failing. As long as it's a beautiful failure, it should be all right.

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A certain amount of discipline can be incredibly valuable to creatives.

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BUILD THE WALL



**CRAIG
LOVE**

Regional Creative Director,
Y&R Red Fuse Hong Kong

Hailing from New Zealand, Craig Love has worked at some of New Zealand and Australia's best agencies, including The Campaign Palace Melbourne and Colenso New Zealand, before moving to Asia in 2008. There, he was a creative director at Ogilvy Singapore before becoming regional creative director at Y&R Hong Kong in 2010. His awards include 10 One Show Pencils (5 gold); Gold, Silver and Bronze Lions at Cannes; a D&AD Pencil; and two Silver Pencil nominations.



Website

Open-plan office layouts are the law of the land for creative agencies these days. I understand why—urban office space in places like Hong Kong, where I work, is in short supply and incredibly expensive—but I miss having an enclosed office! Not just because I miss the privacy, though closing the door is a fast way to limit distractions and cut out chaos. More than that, I desperately miss having walls to paper over with concepts.

In the good old days, I would cover my entire office with jotted ideas. I would post lines, pictures, and random thoughts on the wall. Then, I would go home. Next morning, invariably one of these items would grab my eye. Three or four other people might walk by and see something else that they found striking. It's difficult to duplicate that effect flipping through documents on a desk.

These days, I find I need to create my own space—whether physical or metaphysical. Here's how I do it:

- **Get out of the Office.** Take your partner or team to a coffee shop, gather on some park benches, rent a hotel room if budget permits. If you dare, turn the mobile phones off. Seize a tiny bit of quiet space for a few hours and be as spontaneous and unstructured about it as possible. If you can just relax together as a group for just a little while, ideas will flow of their own accord.

“ Thinking that gets stuck along well-trodden paths is the biggest threat to creativity. ”

KEY LESSONS

- 1 **THINK UNPRODUCTIVELY. DISENGAGE AND LET YOUR WORK LIFE SINK INTO THE BACK OF YOUR THOUGHTS. THAT'S OFTEN WHEN GREAT IDEAS SPRING FORTH.**
- 2 **THE BAD SIDE OF CHAOS IS THOSE 37 EMAILS SITTING IN YOUR INBOX, THE FIVE HOURS A DAY YOU CAN EASILY SPEND LANGUISHING IN POINTLESS MEETINGS.**



BUILD THE WALL

- **Think Unproductively.** I religiously avoid responding to email and phone calls during my private time. They represent the unproductive side of agency life chaos, anyway. Tuning out doesn't mean ceasing to think about work. You couldn't if you tried—and that's a good thing. You'll always be ruminating about the job, about that elusive next opportunity, about that intractable problem. When you're unplugged and weekend camping with your family or riding your bike or watching *Spongebob* on TV, however, those thoughts sink gently to the background. It's amazing how the best ideas can spring from unproductive thinking.
- **Get out of the Rut.** Thinking that gets stuck along well-trodden paths is the biggest threat to creativity. You begin seeing the same stale solutions to every problem. To avoid that, the best creatives I know have interests outside of advertising. An interesting piece of animation, a play, a movie, a history book, a stray quotation—you never know what might contain the germ of your next brilliant idea. Good creative people are magpies, gathering little bits and pieces of input from everything they encounter. When things go right, those influences synthesize into something exciting and new.

There is good chaos and bad chaos. Those little hallway check-ins from co-workers actually can be fabulous. The bad side of chaos is those 37 emails sitting in your inbox, the five hours a day you can easily spend languishing in pointless meetings, especially after you add “creative director” or “regional creative director” to your title. Remember the old maxim: find out what sucks, and don't do that.

If you're like me, at some stage you will find that you need to build little walls around yourself. Even if they aren't the kind, sadly, that you can paste ideas to.

“
Remember
the old maxim:
find out what
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EMPATHY FOR THE CLIENT PUTS CHAOS INTO PERSPECTIVE



**TAMRYN
KERR**

Senior Art Director,
BBH London

Tamryn Kerr is a senior art director at BBH London. She has worked at some of the best creative agencies in New Zealand, including Colenso BBDO and TBWA, before making the move to the United Kingdom. During her career, she has put wigs on cats, created a lava flow in an airport, and made a peace wall in Northern Ireland, all of which have earned her some awards along the way.

Working in a creative agency is always a mix of chaos and process. We feed off the bustle of work and deadlines and people running around, and we develop a kind of camaraderie around accomplishing big things for our clients. That's the nature of creative work.

In the midst of all that activity, the client relationship can be a contributing factor. It's important that we remember that clients are just people trying to figure out what they need to say, and we are trying to figure out how to help them say it. It helps to keep things in perspective when you have empathy for their situation.

To do that, you need to have a good working relationship with the client. Communication is important. When clients understand that you are working hard for them, it can make your life a lot easier. If you really understand your clients' motivations, you have a better opportunity to persuade them to your point of view. Sometimes, that's tricky because the more people you have in a decision process, the more difficult it is to move good work through.

“Clients are just people trying to figure out what they need to say, and we are trying to figure out how to help them say it.”

KEY LESSONS

- 1 WHEN CLIENTS UNDERSTAND THAT YOU ARE WORKING HARD FOR THEM, IT CAN MAKE YOUR LIFE A LOT EASIER.
- 2 WHEN WORKING OUT IDEAS AND PROBLEMS IN A MEETING, BE OPEN TO THE FACT THAT GOOD IDEAS CAN COME FROM ANY PERSON IN THE ROOM.



EMPATHY FOR THE CLIENT PUTS CHAOS INTO PERSPECTIVE

In an ideal situation, you will work with a strong leader on the client side, one who can make clear-cut decisions that everybody understands. The need for good communications with clients and others on the agency team means that there will have to be face-to-face meetings, because email cannot do it. Too much gets lost in email, especially the parts of the communication that are not easily captured in words. I don't have email on my phone and I find that quite liberating.

Of course, that means more needs to happen in face-to-face meetings, which can be complicated because creatives tend to hate meetings. When working out ideas and problems in a meeting, it's important to be open to the fact that good ideas can come from any person in the room, regardless of his or her title. We've had planners come up with award-winning creative ideas. I knew of an instance where a receptionist came up with a great strategy. In this business, you need to keep an open mind to new and interesting perspectives. And always remember, at the end of the day, we're talking to real people.

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Too much gets lost in email, especially the parts of the communication that are not easily captured in words.

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**LISA
GLASGOW**
Creative Director,
Lowe Singapore

Lisa Glasgow's 20-year career spans Ogilvy Hong Kong, BBH Singapore, JWT Bangkok, and JWT Shanghai. She has received awards as both an art director and a copywriter. In 2001, her work for Levi's "Originals" was one of the first fully integrated activation campaigns to come out of Asia, earning Agency of the Year and Client of the Year awards. Today, she's responsible for spreading the words *Dirt is Good* for Unilever, helping gold lions roar and market share soar!

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With experience, you get a good sense of how much you can achieve within certain timeframes. Sadly, in creative agency life, we often get pushed past those limits. You have too much work, too few people, and not enough time. You realize that you won't meet the demands and stress descends on you. When that happens the pressure cooker heats up! I think we sometimes allow ourselves to rely on the idea that some spontaneous spark of inspiration will blast out of the creative team's collective head, solving everything in one big, magical bang.

But that's *not* how creativity works. It's not magic: it's a process.

When I started my career 20 years ago, technology was regarded as the answer to our prayers. Soon, we thought, we would be able to achieve everything in half the time. The idea of a four-day week dangled seductively! Not so. Now with nearly limitless platforms—digital and traditional—to produce for, somehow the goal has shifted to generating twice the output in half the time.

When I moved over to my current job three years ago, things were especially frenetic. We spent the first year wooing a major former client—an international laundry detergent company—back into the fold. Having succeeded, we spent the entire next year restructuring our business to respond to the global demands of a giant retail client.

“ That's *not* how creativity works.

It's not magic: it's a process. ”



KEY LESSONS

- 1 WHEN IT COMES TO THE COMPLEX BRAIN PROCESSES ENGAGED DURING CREATIVE WORK, WE CAN ONLY FOCUS ON ONE THING AT A TIME EFFECTIVELY. ACCEPT THAT, AND YOU WILL INSTANTLY LIMIT CHAOS.
- 2 IT'S FAR BETTER TO DO ONE THING WITH 100 PERCENT OF YOUR ATTENTION, THAN IT IS TO JUGGLE PRIORITIES WITH DIVIDED FOCUS.

FOCUS. DO. SMILE.

Despite all this, I'm not insane. Why? Because I hit upon a formula for sanity:

- **Focus.** Multitasking is a myth. Yes, we can all do the washing whilst holding a conversation and checking email. That's relatively mindless. But when it comes to the complex brain processes engaged during creative work, we can only focus on one thing at a time effectively. Accept that, and you will instantly limit chaos.
- **Do.** This point is directly connected to my first. Choose one burning building at a time to deal with, and put that fire out completely. Then, move on to the next. It's far better to do one thing with 100 percent of your attention, even for a tiny amount of time, than it is to juggle priorities with divided focus. You will never get anything done. If you work that way, no fire ever really goes out. What you can achieve in just 10 minutes of 100 percent attentiveness is huge.
- **Smile.** I have made it a habit of sticking a smile on my face, even when I'm working alone at home. Yes, that makes me look stupid, but I can live with that because there are so many physical benefits in smiling. It relaxes muscles in your face, an effect that then courses throughout the body. It releases endorphins in the brain which also aid creativity. Plus, if you go around the office smiling, you give other people confidence in your abilities and in their own. So smiling creates a cascade of confidence. Even a fake smile soon becomes genuine, so fake away!

“
Smiling creates
a cascade of
confidence.”

Three years ago, I pasted a note with those three words—focus, do, smile—on my wall where I can never fail to notice them each morning. They represent the most important insight that I have gained in this position. I hope they help others the way they have helped me.



CHAOS IS THE RAW MATERIAL FOR CREATIVITY



**IGNACIO
JARDÓN**

Digital Creative Director,
Young & Rubicam
Buenos Aires

Ignacio Jardón is from Buenos Aires, Argentina. He studied advertising at Universidad del Salvador, and his career started in 2004 as a copywriter at independent shops. From 2010 to 2014, he focused in social media, digital, and integrated projects at Ogilvy & Mather, Buenos Aires. In November 2014, Ignacio moved to Young & Rubicam, Buenos Aires. He has received awards at Cannes, One Show, New York Festivals, Ojo de Iberoamérica, and Effie. He is an instructor at Miami Ad School, Buenos Aires.



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Chaos is an opportunity to discover new things. In the beginning of a creative effort, you are working with lots of possibilities, and you have to manage the chaos to build an idea for a client. It's like the universe forming out of chaos. Chaos is a place of opportunities.

All the possibilities begin to take shape in the context of the brief, which lays out limits that define goals of the creative effort. Managing the chaos involves telling the creative teams they have to think within those limits. Having chaos inside those limits is okay.

It is often the case that clients use our presentation or ideas to think of the brief, and this is part of the process. With some clients, I know they aren't going to buy ideas from my initial presentation. They use my ideas to expand their own thinking about what they want to say. It is a thinking process, and many changes happen along the way. When clients change the brief, it's part of the thinking and communication process.

“ Managing the chaos involves telling the creative teams they have to think within those limits. Having chaos inside those limits is okay. ”

KEY LESSONS

- 1 ALL THE POSSIBILITIES BEGIN TO TAKE SHAPE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BRIEF, WHICH LAYS OUT LIMITS THAT DEFINE GOALS OF THE CREATIVE EFFORT. HAVING CHAOS INSIDE THOSE LIMITS IS OKAY.**
- 2 CHANGE IS HEALTHY. IF YOU ALWAYS WORK WITH YOUR SAME FORMULA, YOU BECOME BORED AND SO WILL YOUR CLIENTS.**



CHAOS IS THE RAW MATERIAL FOR CREATIVITY

Sometimes, it can be a frustrating experience to go to clients with an idea that they reject or change. I have a positive perspective on this, however, because when clients ask for a change, it's a new opportunity to do something different and better. It's important to use that frustration to reach into the chaos of that moment and build something new. That is essential, because the reality of the world we live in is change.

In fact, change is healthy. If you always work with your same formula, you become bored and so will your clients. Clients want to do different things, so you need strategies that keep things fresh. Sometimes, that means mixing up the teams so that new people come with new ideas. Sometimes, it means coming up with ideas and offering them to clients to give them a new creative direction. Always be on the lookout for new places of fresh inspiration.

“

When clients ask for a change, it's a new opportunity to do something different and better.

”



BE NIMBLE, BE QUICK, AND BE CLEAR



**AARON
ALAMO**

Associate Creative Director,
TBWA CHIAT\DAY

Aaron Alamo has more than 15 years of experience in advertising. He started his career doing illustrations for *Playboy*, before transitioning to advertising at McCann Erickson, BBDO and Y&R Mexico. He later moved to New York and spent five years as a creative director at The Vidal Partnership. He then transitioned to Saatchi & Saatchi, where he worked with General Mills and P&G. He now works as an associate creative director for TBWA\Chiat\Day, working with Accenture and Travelers Insurance.



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In theory, managing the creative process is straightforward. The client makes a request, planners and creatives put together a brief, the client approves it, creative develops the idea, and—when the client gives their final sign-off—it goes into production. That’s the theory.

Of course, it’s rarely that easy. Sometimes, in the interest of saving time or moving a project forward, clients review and sign off on a creative brief that was never shared with the creative department. When it finally gets to creative, they don’t like it; and the process gets complicated. Other times, the client sees and approves the brief but never shows it to the upper-level executives who have the final say. This happened to me once, and when we submitted our work, the client’s top management loved everything about it except that it didn’t say what they wanted it to say.

The lack of clear, concise communications in and around a creative brief is often the source of unnecessary chaos. Many creative briefs are simply too long and overthought for the idea they’re trying to convey. We should not bore our clients with a long presentation about a spot that viewers are only going to see for a few seconds.

“ The lack of clear, concise communications in and around a creative brief is often the source of unnecessary chaos. ”

KEY LESSONS

- 1 BE CLEAR IN THE CONCEPT YOU’RE COMMUNICATING.**
- 2 CLIENTS ARE COMING TO US BECAUSE THEY EXPECT US TO HAVE THE VISION AND BE ABLE TO COMMUNICATE IT.**



BE NIMBLE, BE QUICK, AND BE CLEAR

It's not always easy to be concise in creative briefs because sometimes clients aren't sure exactly what they want; sometimes, we're not clear in the concept we're presenting. Clients are coming to us because they expect us to have the vision and be able to communicate it. Even under the best of circumstances, however, things happen, and then you need to adjust quickly. Once, we were doing a spot for an important yogurt brand. The idea involved connecting the brand to its support for cancer research. The actors were two young kids, and the kid without cancer was to give a little candle in a yogurt cup to the kid who had cancer, like he was giving him hope. The casting went really well, and the client fell in love with both kids.

Now, the actor playing the kid who had the cancer had to have his head shaved. So production day came, and the person from the makeup department shaved the wrong kid. The kid was saying, "But I'm not . . . but I'm not . . ." as the makeup person was telling the kid to hold still. When we figured out the mistake, everybody freaked out; then we had to shave the cancer kid, and now we had two shaved kids.

The production people were wonderful, though. They found a wig for the "healthy" kid, and we went forward with the shoot, even though we were all worried sick about what the client would think. We were cracking up, too, because the whole thing was pretty funny. In the end, the client never realized what happened and loved the piece.

Sometimes, things just happen. You have to be smart, and you have to react fast. If you can, enjoy the experience.

“

Many creative briefs are simply too long and overthought for the idea they're trying to convey.

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BE PASSIONATE BUT FOCUSED



**RENATA
EL DIB**

Art Director,
Young & Rubicam

Renata El Dib is a creative / senior art director at Young & Rubicam in Brazil. She has previously worked as an art director at Loducca, DDB Brazil, Grey Group and Lowe.

This might surprise my American colleagues: compared with the United States, where creative agency life is generally more structured, agency life in Brazil is kind of a mess. Often, I used to arrive at work at 9 a.m. with no idea when I will be able to leave. Nowadays it's a little bit better because Y&R is a very structured and organized agency. After 10 or 12 years, though, I am used to it.

If it sounds as if I'm complaining, nothing could be farther from the truth. I do what I love and I do it with passion. Even on my longest days, I don't really see the time passing. For me, work is a pleasure. It has always been like that.

Years ago, when I was with another agency, the copywriter and I worked together on a lot of retail accounts, particularly car company ad campaigns. I loved them, but I noticed two other people in the same agency were always complaining about their retail assignments.

Being naive, I approached my creative director, concerned that somehow we were getting all the great jobs while the others were being forced to do all the dirty work. I wondered if they were possibly being treated unfairly.

"Renata," my creative director laughed, incredulously. "You think you have the best jobs?" That's what those two guys were always telling me, and I believed them, so I said, yes. "No way," he exclaimed. "You have the same crap jobs as they have!"

The difference, he said, was that I always approached each job with enthusiasm. "You always look to the bright side, and they don't," he told me. "And this reflects in your work. You make the job be the best job."

KEY LESSONS

- 1** CHOOSE A PRIORITY FOR THE DAY, AND STICK TO IT UNTIL THE TASK IS FINISHED. THEN, MOVE ONTO THE NEXT PRIORITY.
- 2** BE PASSIONATE, EVEN IF YOU KNOW THE JOB MAY BE A BUST. GIVE IT ALL YOU'VE GOT, BECAUSE YOU WILL LEARN SOMETHING NEW.



BE PASSIONATE BUT FOCUSED

Experience has not really dimmed that enthusiasm, but it has made me a little wiser. I'm better at understanding that not every campaign will go perfectly, and I have learned to let go of my perfectionism. I still believe, however, that the work should be as close to perfect as possible. Every job is a learning opportunity, even if the project is a bust.

Like anyone else, of course, I experience moments when things aren't so good. Big creative agencies can get bogged down in bureaucracy, which isn't conducive to creativity. But that's simply part of the process. Somehow this helps, to learn how to still be creative in difficult moments.

My career has taught me several lessons that I think are valuable to pass on, even to people who are not as predisposed as I to look on the sunny side:

- **Prioritize. Creative agency life is always chaotic**—just more so in Brazil, where art directors must get their hands dirty making layouts, photoshooting, and generally doing whatever must be done. My advice is, never let chaos steal your focus. I tend to pick one thing and perform that task with 100 percent focus. That allows me to complete it quickly and move onto the next priority.
- **Be Passionate.** When we do creative work with passion, it becomes a pleasure. To quote Mary Poppins, "In every job that must be done, there is an element of fun. You find the fun, and—snap!—the job's a game!" For me, every day is like that: I'm always happy doing my work. That attitude helps me a lot.
- **Drop Activities That Waste Your Time: Meetings.** True, this isn't always possible. Preproduction meetings in particular tend to be large—the photographer, director, art buyer, casting coordinator, and producer are all involved, and those are important, productive meetings. But big internal agency meetings, I find, are a waste of time. No one ever seems to know what they're supposed to do afterwards. So, try to keep those meetings small, fast, and focused.

“
Never let
chaos steal
your focus.

”



IF THEY COULD IMAGINE IT, THEY WOULDN'T NEED YOU



**MATT
BERGANTINO**

Associate Creative Director,
TREMOR

Matt Bergantino learned to ride the chaotic swirl of agency life by working as a copywriter for a small, scrappy digital agency that, over the course of nine years, became a multidisciplinary organization that at its height employed more than 300 people. Now, as an associate creative director at TREMOR, Matt is back to his roots, working on a small, scrappy team of brilliant creatives and strategists who get work done with minimal fuss.



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Agency life is chaotic because what consumers want and what clients want are often different. The consumer is more powerful than ever, but you still feel that disconnect. As agency people, our job is to find a balance, to find a creative way to give everyone what they want—a tough job. I don't have any unique tips or hacks to share, but I do have three thought experiments that might help you back away from the ledge and not jump out the window, at least not today.

If I Weld Two Trailers Together, Does That Count as a Doublewide?

Many years ago I worked for a mortgage company for three days. It was a lonely little shop in a strip mall by a field. There was no sign on the door; you just had to know it was there. The guy I sat next to had a radio on his desk tuned to a talk station, so there was this undercurrent of sound: a tinny, angry voice at low volume. Everybody wore pleated pants, the kind that puff out when you sit down. The job was to call people and get them to refinance. One guy I talked to on the phone asked me if he could claim two welded-together trailers as a doublewide. That's when it all hit me—the no sign, the pleated pants, the talk radio. I quit. Not in a harsh or disrespectful way—there was nothing wrong with the job—it just wasn't for me. I wanted to do something creative. When agency life gets chaotic and clients give contradictory feedback and priorities shift, think of the cold-call mortgage business. Then, get back to work.

“As agency people, our job is to find a balance, to find a creative way to give everyone what they want.”

KEY LESSONS

- 1 CLIENTS NEED TO SEE IT BEFORE THEY'LL PAY FOR IT. GIVE YOUR CLIENTS A BREAK AND HELP THEM IMAGINE STUFF.**
- 2 IN THE END, THE MEETINGS AND TIMELINES WILL BE A BLUR. ALL YOU'LL REMEMBER IS THE WORK.**



IF THEY COULD IMAGINE IT, THEY WOULDN'T NEED YOU

If They Could Imagine It, They Wouldn't Need You

Clients often need to “see it” to know whether they “like it” enough to “pay for it.” Much of my life, and maybe yours too, is spent mocking up stuff that clients will eventually kind of sort of buy a version of. It can be frustrating to spend hundreds of hours refining things that consumers never see. Here's the thing: when we were learning to be artists and writers, our clients were learning to be engineers and accountants. Without them, we wouldn't have running water or Microsoft Excel. Without us, they wouldn't have brands. If they could imagine what their brand looks like and acts like and is, down to the last visual flourish, they wouldn't need us. So, give them a break and help them imagine stuff. That's what you're here for.

The Consumer Is Rooting for You

When agency life gets hectic, remember that you're creating stuff that gets beamed out and lodged in the brains (and hopefully hearts) of real people. The “end user” doesn't care about the priority of communication or the business objective or what job number you billed your time to. The end user notices only how easy it is to navigate the website you made or how, against all odds, that email subject line you wrote was actually kind of funny and weirdly insightful. One day, when it's all over, the endless meetings and ridiculous timelines will be a blur. All we'll remember is the work. So, make it the best it can be.

“

When we were learning to be artists and writers, our clients were learning to be engineers and accountants.

”



CHASE THAT FEELING



**HEATHER
WAGNER**

Creative Director,
Saatchi & Saatchi

Heather Wagner is a writer and creative director based in New York City. Her career began in advertising at Publicis & Hal Riney, detoured briefly into books (*Friend or Faux*, Random House; *The Inspired Home*, Rizzoli), and then on to *ELLE* magazine as director of Copy & Creative Content. In 2014, Heather returned to advertising because she missed the magic. Currently a creative director at Saatchi, her hobbies include brisk cocktails, lazy jogs, and admiring dachshunds on the street.



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Earlier this year, we were shooting a Mother's Day spot for a skin care client. The idea was, no matter how awkward you were growing up, you always looked beautiful to mom. We cast seven adorably gawky pre-teen girls and shot it on a limited budget in Vancouver. We loved what we got.

When we cut it, however, the spot wasn't working as scripted. We concocted another way to execute the script in editing that we thought was just wonderful. We were ecstatic. We had created this beautiful thing!

Unfortunately, it wasn't what we had sold the client on. The account team reviewed the rough cut and they loved it, but then they wanted to see the storyboarded version—which didn't exist. They insisted that they needed us to cut the boarded spot or the client wouldn't buy it.

Try as we might, we couldn't make the original script work. We thought we were going to get fired. We wrote dozens of versions, we grabbed the mic and recorded our own VOs. Then, my creative director partner suggested an elegant solution: a simple explanatory title card. We also recorded a scratch track with VO talent and new music.

It worked, and we presented two versions to the client. In the end, to our relief, the client bought the agency recommended spot. The episode taught me a few things, though:

- **Stick to the Mandate.** Stay on task and do the job as sold, even if that approach won't result in an A plus piece of work. Experiment and push the limits but don't lose sight of what you were hired to do.
- **Be Open to Everything.** Sometimes, the answer is staring you in the face. We had done a spot only a year earlier that had a title card; when my partner pointed that out, we suddenly found we had an elegant solution to a total conundrum.

KEY LESSONS

- 1 FOCUS ON WHAT YOU WERE HIRED TO DO.
- 2 STAYING ON TASK DOESN'T MEAN ABANDONING CREATIVITY.



CHASE THAT FEELING

- **Trust Your Gut.** The client brief has the insight and information you need. After you absorb that, the creativity comes from you. The most powerful creative calls I make tend to reflect things that I have personally felt or seen in my own life. They rarely come from the client brief's three bullet points. Staying on task doesn't mean abandoning your instincts.

When you're in a big creative department like Saatchi, where there are so many moving parts, you have to expect a state of constant destabilization and chaos. It wasn't always that way: I remember spending two months working out a single radio ad early in my career. I find that you almost have to trick your brain into being okay with constant chaos. As creative thinkers, we want to sit and ruminate. We want to give an idea breathing space so it can grow. But that's not always possible these days.

We have a great team, and everyone from account management to production to planning has a lot to say. For me, that's wonderful because I'm very collaborative. The downside is that no idea germinates, grows, and becomes "a thing" without first crossing a billion checkpoints. That's where chaos begins to brew.

You must negotiate your vision against so many objectives—and objections—as well as anticipate issues the client might have. Besides that, there are so many internal deadlines, so many presentations, so much revision. The ideation and creative process is the best part of what we do, but it's probably the smallest part of the day-to-day process.

Getting a good idea is still the most fun and exhilarating feeling in the world. That's the thing you've got to keep chasing, even in this new, mad-dash creative agency world. So here's a final piece of advice: don't chase the awards, don't chase the salary, and don't chase the stupid status. Chase that feeling. I believe that's what leads to success—and hopefully, good work.

“

Getting a good idea is still the most fun and exhilarating feeling in the world.

”



THE ART OF CREATIVE COMPROMISE



**ALEX
RUSSELL**

Senior Creative Director,
BBDOATL

Alex Russell has been at this since 2000, when he started his career working on Volkswagen at Arnold Boston. After one too many freezing Aprils, he and his family moved to San Francisco in 2007 to work at Venables Bell, where he rebranded Intel and did some fun Audi work. Since 2010, he has been in Atlanta as a senior creative director on AT&T, helping to oversee campaigns like “It’s not complicated.”

Some level of chaos is just part of this business. Some of it is good, some of it not so good.

A few years ago I was on a shoot, when just minutes from rolling the day’s first film, our account manager pulls me aside and says a competitor is running a special promotion that affects everything we’re shooting. We all sat down, client and creative, and wrote something on the spot that could accommodate the handful of actors we had on set. In the end, it wasn’t the best spot we’d ever done but we got the job done.

The larger point here being that, sometimes, you need to make creative compromises, no matter if they’re forced on you by tight deadlines or by clients who change their minds.

Young people entering this business often come with an attitude that they will fight for everything, resisting every change a client wants. Over time, they realize that they can’t fight every battle like that; not every compromise is the end of the world. The sun will still rise tomorrow. Seven times out of 10, those client changes don’t actually end up making the final product worse. And, yes, sometimes, they make it better.

The more you learn to play nice, the more clients will trust in you as a real partner—which leads to them handing you more creative rope. And we can all use more of that.

“ Sometimes, you need to make creative compromises. ”

KEY LESSONS

- 1 ONE OF THE BIG THINGS YOU LEARN OVER TIME IN THIS BUSINESS IS THAT SEVEN TIMES OUT OF 10, THOSE CHANGES THE CLIENT HAS YOU MAKE DON’T ACTUALLY END UP MAKING THE FINAL PRODUCT WORSE.**
- 2 WHEN YOU BEGIN TO REALLY UNDERSTAND THE CLIENT AND EARN HIS OR HER TRUST, THAT’S WHEN THE CLIENT STARTS GIVING YOU MORE AND MORE CREATIVE ROPE.**

GRUMPY IS GOOD FOR CONQUERING CHAOS



KEN TREVOR

Creative Director for Europe,
Red Fuse, Prague

An itinerant adman from London, Ken Trevor's creative career has included working in seven countries over 22 years at agencies such as DDB, McCann, Bozell, Fallon, and BBDO, picking up some awards along the way. Since 2011, he has been the creative lead on the Hill's Pet Nutrition business at Red Fuse Communications (part of the Y&R Group), based in Prague, Czech Republic.



Website

Grumpy is good for conquering chaos. Or, to put it another way, say "no," and then suggest an alternative. Someone might even thank you for it.

I detest chaos in the office. To me, as a creative person, it represents wasted time and energy. That said, I believe that office chaos can be fixed, if people really want to fix it. Here are six rules that might help conquer chaos in advertising.

1. You Can't Please Everybody if You're a Creative Person

As marketing professionals, we're supposed to understand that "you can't appeal to everyone" when selling a brand. Each brand has its audience and advocates. So, it amazes me when people in an agency try to get everybody on the client and agency side to align (i.e., personally agree) on the creative work. Floods of feedback dilute and often drown the creative product. At some point, somebody has to say no. During my DDB days, Bob Kuperman told us, "Everybody is too reasonable [accommodating changes]. I want people to be unreasonable."

2. Get out of the Office

I've never understood how journalists can write in a chaotic newsroom. (Maybe they're smarter than ad people—probably.) One thing's for sure, a change of scenery can spark creativity. I love this quote from the late, great David Abbott: "Great copy has been written in cafés, on trains, on beaches, on planes, in cars—even occasionally at a desk."*

“ I believe that office chaos can be fixed, if people really want to fix it. ”



KEY LESSONS

- 1 YOU CAN'T PLEASE EVERYBODY. SAY "NO," AND THEN SUGGEST AN ALTERNATIVE.
- 2 DEVELOPING A STRATEGY WITH THE CLIENT CAN MAKE SELLING THE CREATIVE CONCEPT A MORE LOGICAL, SMOOTHER NEXT STEP.

GRUMPY IS GOOD FOR CONQUERING CHAOS

3. Use Old-School, Hand-Drawn Illustrations Instead of Highly Finished Comps for Your First-Round Concept Presentation

Simple, yet attractive illustrations can be faster to execute and therefore save you time. They also force the client (and agency) to focus on nailing the big idea instead of getting sidetracked by executional stuff in the beginning.

4. Invite the Client to the Agency and Brainstorm the Strategy Together

You have to know when to do this. We've tended to do it when there's a need to thrash out possible insights and technical claims and how they might form the spine of the campaign. Developing the strategy together can make selling the creative concept to the client a more logical, smoother next step.

5. Inject Fun into Even the Most Tedious Tasks

One day, our project manager—Kaveh—showed up with a big grin and made us adopt a Kanban board (to keep track of project status). With it came a competition. For the first couple of weeks, one person from creative and one from account servicing voted the best at using it won a trip to the luxury spa three floors below for a free massage. The fun element really motivated the team.

6. Make Sure the Client Actually Sees the Good Ideas

Specifically at round 1, on any sizable project, don't have a predetermined restriction on the number of concepts or directions you'll present. The creative team might bring five to seven excellent ideas to the internals (at which time, the other 13 bad ideas are thrown out). Clients can see when the agency has put energy and commitment into the creative development. The good clients appreciate this. It can result in approvals and even finishing the project before the deadline.

“

Invite the Client
to the Agency and
Brainstorm the
Strategy Together

”

* *The Copy Book* (1995)



GROWING COMPASSION



**SERENA
CONNELLY**

Freelance Creative Director,
Ginormous, Inc.

Serena Connelly is a multidisciplinary freelance creative director and writer in New York City. Her work has received numerous awards, from One Show Pencils to Webby Awards to Cannes Lions, and been featured in a variety of industry publications. She is also listed as the inventor on several Intellectual Property patents for her innovative work on a suite of P&G-branded mobile apps.



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Not long ago, an associate creative director in my group came to see me—he was clearly distraught. He had been with the agency for a long time, recently turned 60, was run down, and felt he was getting too old for the business. “I’m going to quit,” he informed me.

I imagine most group creative directors might have silently rejoiced at the opportunity to replace some “grey hair” with someone younger and hipper. But this guy had years of experience, both with the agency and the industry and was a valued team member. “I think that what you need is a break,” I told him. “You’re still good at what you do, so your age really doesn’t matter.” I gave him a hug and told him how important he was to the department.

It sounded to me like he was burned out and needed to spend time with his family. I suggested that he take a leave of absence for a month or two unpaid, if he could afford it. He took two months off. When he returned, he was strong and healthy. He quickly helped us win some new business. He’s still with the agency today.

This story illustrates something I see lacking in agency life—something that, if it appeared in greater quantities, might make some creative agency chaos disappear. I’m talking about compassion.

If more people were compassionate toward others, office politics would be reduced. Fewer people would instinctually retreat to “cover-your-ass” mode. Co-workers would give each other the benefit of the doubt and know that the people around them have their back. But most importantly, I believe the work would improve. Brands that demonstrate compassion for their consumers, brands that give love, get loyalty in return.

KEY LESSONS

- 1 COMPASSION IS SORELY LACKING IN CREATIVE AGENCY LIFE. ITS PRESENCE WOULD GO A LONG WAY TOWARD KILLING CHAOS.**
- 2 IT IS DIFFICULT TO BE COMPASSIONATE TOWARD OTHERS AND MORE HUMANE IN YOUR MESSAGING IF YOUR OWN MIND ISN’T HEALTHY AND STRONG.**

“ Boredom is essential to creativity. ”



GROWING COMPASSION

I don't necessarily think that growing compassion is a top-down process, either. It would probably be better grown from within and roots up; by people taking better care of themselves so they have the patience and energy for their co-workers and clients. The challenge is that it's difficult to be directly compassionate toward others, and more humane in your messaging, if your own mind isn't healthy and strong. Here's my advice:

- **Take Breaks.** This is hugely important to the creative mind. If creative problems are constantly swarming your brain and you never hit the reset button, you might never find the right solutions. Our brains need time to relax and just be. Boredom is essential to creativity.
- **Live Below Your Means.** Save your money for a sunny day. That way, if the situation calls for it, you can take that much-needed leave of absence or well-deserved time off between jobs. Creatives often lose sight of this and live like rock stars. Then, when layoffs inevitably come, they find themselves in a stressful financial crisis from which they can't extricate themselves. That is hardly conducive to a creative frame of mind.
- **Maintain Supportive Relationships.** Maintain strong connections with your old work colleagues. These people will understand what you are going through and can act as objective confidants. Also be sure to spend time with friends and family who have no connection to advertising. Lastly, don't neglect yourself. Don't skip your favorite spin class, keep going to yoga and your mind will be better equipped to handle the chaos of agency life. These relationships, and the support and nurturing they offer, will help you successfully navigate any chaotic situation.

Some of today's most effective advertising campaigns contain a big dose of kindness. Brands like The Honest Company and Tom's Shoes are built on it. Yet we have not adopted this concept into agency life. So our rumor mills, backstabbing politics, and high turnover rates remain.

If I could teach young creatives one thing, it would simply be this: grow compassion. Grow it within yourselves and within the brands you promote. Start by being more present, practicing caring, reach out to someone who needs support and I bet you'll find your work and your work life will improve.



KEEP YOUR DISTANCE



TIM ROAN

Creative Director, Copywriter,
BBDO NY

Tim Roan used to be an account guy. He started and sold a garden design business. He was in two rock and/or roll bands. He was a writer/performer on a sketch comedy TV show. He started the catchphrase, “That shit is Kodak.” It hasn’t caught on, yet. Currently, he makes advertising that his mom likes. Tim lives on a cloud with his wife, Vicki; son, Lincoln; and daughter, Harriet. He will die alone in debtor’s prison.



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I’ve wanted to be in advertising since I was a kid. Advertising is the poor man’s Hollywood, where you get to work on one assignment after another, telling funny, touching, cool, sad, inspiring stories quickly. It’s a place where greatness is always right around the corner.

Ad agency life can be a gas, but it’s also stressful. You burn out easily, and often you get kicked out before you’re ready to go. I see lots of old husks along the roadside, that resemble me.

I wish I had an antidote that involved a hot tub and drugs or something like that. I don’t. To me, distance is probably the key.

So, what can happen when you fail to keep your distance? Let me tell you a story.

Years ago, while I was based in New York, I was shooting a series of films in Jamaica while simultaneously working a commercial shoot in Berlin. I spent what seemed like weeks on planes bouncing among Hamburg and Berlin, Germany, and Kingston, Jamaica.

At one point, while scouting locations and casting a job in Kingston, people in Berlin got on the phone and started screaming at me to return to work for them—now! Which I did. By the time the whole ordeal was all over, I was exhausted, my nerves were frayed, and I was in terrible physical shape.

Back in New York, I begged for a few days off. “No,” I was told. “You have to go to San Francisco tomorrow and work on a rumble.” A *rumble* happens when top creatives from an agency’s global offices all gather to work a project that requires all their collective brainpower. I did as I was told and stayed up the next two nights and days trying to come up with something great.

KEY LESSONS

- 1 KEEP SOME DISTANCE BETWEEN YOURSELF AND THE JOB—IT’S ONLY ADVERTISING!
- 2 KEEP YOUR MIND NIMBLE AND CREATIVE. LISTEN TO WHAT PEOPLE AROUND YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT.



KEEP YOUR DISTANCE

Before it was all over, I somehow found myself at a podium in a San Francisco hotel ballroom, making a charming, funny presentation with my creative partner. That performance masked the uncontrollable panic attack I was experiencing—my ribcage muscles had locked up. I couldn't breathe. My heart hurt.

After exiting the stage, I grabbed a hotel phone and called for an ambulance. Minutes later, I was wheeled out on a gurney—right in front of all those big-shot advertising folks. That experience taught me a few things about keeping myself sane:

- **Keep Distance Between Yourself and the Job.** I don't mean, don't care so much—you don't want to cheat your passion—but always remember that there will be other opportunities. There will be a way to salvage something that appears unsalvageable.
- **Keep Your Mind Nimble.** For me, that means watching and listening. What are people talking about on the cross-town bus? What do they argue about in the Taco Bell, murmur to themselves in the art gallery? That helps keep my brain attuned and creative, ready for the next assignment.
- **Nothin' Means Nothin'.** Cemeteries are filled with people who forget this. We are born, we work, we die. Keep perspective. There's more to life than advertising.

That said, this is the greatest job in the world. If you manage to land a spot in an agency like BBDO, where there's a true *esprit de corps*, it is even better. True, you can do great work at places where the atmosphere is stone cold. You can also do great work at places where the vibe is funny and warm. I will always take the second.

“

There will be another opportunity. There will be a way to salvage something that appears unsalvageable.

”



FORCIBLE DETACHMENT



IAIN NEVILL

Creative Director,
Saatchi & Saatchi New York

Internationally awarded creative and founder of an independent culture magazine, Iain Nevill began his unconventional career in a small agency in Glasgow, Scotland. Over the past decade, his talent and eye for the nontraditional have seen him working in creative hot-shops in London, Barcelona, and New York City. Along the way, he has been able to shape some of the world's most iconic brands, including Coca-Cola, Google, AT&T, Bacardi, and BMW.



Website

Chaos is always a time thing. It's the nature of the beast that creatives are always pressed for time.

Partly, it's a function of never really knowing when a task is finished. You obviously want to give yourself as much "concepting" time as possible. Inevitably, that means that "concepting" eats into your executing time. Invariably, you're pressed for executing time, which puts you into a presentation time crunch. All this added up equals chaos.

I have found one durable antidote, however: forcible detachment.

Several years ago, I was doing a job for a major liquor brand coming up on a big anniversary. It was a huge photo shoot, with lots of models, lots of costumes, lots of symbolic visual elements, many moving parts. Everything needed to be signed off by what seemed like everyone in the client organization. On our end, my partner and I were handling the entire job ourselves.

It was chaotic. So, my partner and I essentially commandeered a "war room," a small office in our agency that had a door. We entered that room and exited the chaos.

It was great. It gave other people a sense that we were not to be bothered. We could be reached, but clearly, we weren't encouraging it. It was like force field around us, shielding us from needless distraction. It seemed to lend what we were working on greater importance.

“ Chaos is always a time thing. ”

KEY LESSONS

- 1 FORCIBLY DETACH YOURSELF FROM CHAOS.
- 2 GET OUT OF THE OFFICE. WHERE POSSIBLE, AVOID MEETINGS, REMOVE YOURSELF FROM PEOPLE KNOCKING ON YOUR DOOR AND ASKING WHETHER YOU WATCHED *MAD MEN* LAST NIGHT.



FORCIBLE DETACHMENT

It also proved a sanity saver. Several times, the client called on us to re-concept various elements of the shoot on the fly. For instance, an executive at one point decided that something in the imagery might be insulting to certain customers, so it had to be removed, re-concepted, and replaced. Meanwhile, we were reviewing casting for the models, set design, and wardrobe. Had we not forcibly separated ourselves and given ourselves space to think, my partner and I might have actually gone insane.

So, my theme is simple: forcibly detach yourself from chaos. How do you do that?

- **Get out of the Office.** Where possible, avoid meetings, remove yourself from people knocking on your door and asking whether you watched *Mad Men* last night. Creativity requires thought, and you need space to get a clear head. If you're working with a partner, you need time and space to bounce ideas back and forth, uninterrupted. Otherwise, your whole day just gets eaten up with tiny, annoying distractions.
- **Arrive Early, Leave Late.** This isn't as sexy as the previous idea, but it works. Head into the office really early once in a while, before anyone else arrives. Alternately, stay late, after others go home. Either way, you'll find yourself with uninterrupted time to noodle over ideas and tick items off your to-do list. It's a strategy that can give you a mental boost every now and then, when things feel crazy and unwieldy.

Remember, you are not indispensable. Things will keep running even without your constant presence. If there's an emergency and you are needed, people will find you.

The point is, don't let the work bog you down. If you find it's doing that, then literally walk away.

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